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NIGHTMARE 5: THE DREAM CHILD

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The Nightmares ON ELM STREET

Part 4: THE DREAM MASTER Part 5: THE DREAM CHILD

A novel by Joseph Locke based on the screenplays

Part 4: THE DREAM MASTER
Story by William Kotzwinkle and Brian Helgeland
Screenplay by Brian Helgeland and Scott Pierce

Part 5: THE DREAM CHILD
Written by Leslie Bohem

Based on the characters created by Wes Craven

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET
PART 4:
The Dream Master

Part One: KRISTEN
Chapter One

Kristen's dream began with a particular kind of dread—thick and heavy and oppressive—that she hadn't felt in a long time. Almost two years, to be exact.

It began with a sound: a high-pitched screech, like a piece of chalk scraping over a hard surface.

As she walked through the darkness of her sleep, Kristen found that, in fact, the screech *was* being made by a piece of chalk. It was held in the dainty hand of a little girl hunkered on a clean Elm Street sidewalk beneath the clawing limbs of autumn-stripped trees. She was pressing the chalk to concrete and moving it with great care, the tip of her tongue protruding from the corner of her mouth, eyes squinting with concentration. She stopped now and then to choose another piece of chalk from a selection of multicolored pieces lined up by her right knee. Her blond curls danced gently in a sighing breeze.

Kristen walked cautiously down the sidewalk in the dim light of a dreamlike dusk, her feet crackling through the brittle leaves shed by the trees. She stopped behind the little girl and stared over her shoulder at the picture she was drawing.

It was a house... a very familiar house.

Kristen leaned forward to get a closer look. The house had an almost exaggerated cheerfulness: a picket fence, large windows, a healthy tree in front, fat with green leaves, and a bright sun shining from above.

But it was wrong. Kristen *knew* that house, and there was nothing cheerful about it. The house the little girl was drawing was Freddy's house, and there was nothing healthy about it, nothing good. She stood and sucked in her breath sharply because—

—it was there, Freddy's house, facing the street like a death's head. The paint was cracked and curling back like decaying skin, and the boarded windows resembled the sewn-up eyes of a corpse after an

autopsy. The tree in the yard was skeletal and the pickets of the fence looked like dried bones filed to sharp points.

"Hello."

Kristen looked again at the girl, who was staring up with doelike eyes.

"Do... do you live here?" Kristen asked.

The corners of the girl's mouth turned downward slightly and she shook her head. "Nobody *lives* here."

Kristen whispered, "Where's Freddy?"

Covering her mouth with tiny fingers, the girl released a giggle that sounded like shattered teeth falling on metal. "He's not home."

When Kristen looked at the drawing again, the street darkened and her throat constricted. Standing in the window of the chalk house was a figure. It was crudely drawn but unmistakable: Freddy Krueger.

A bony hand of lightning clawed the sky and thunder clapped. Drops of rain speckled the sidewalk and the chalk drawing began to smear.

Kristen looked up and trembled beneath silently moving clouds that looked like bloodclots. Her chest filled with dread—

He's back, God help us, he's back.

—and she looked down again. The girl was gone. She looked in every direction, her eyes darting through the shadowy light, but she could not find the child.

The rain splashed onto the sidewalk and the chalk drawing melted quickly, its colors blending together into something that resembled spilled blood.

There was a sound from the house—a dry creaking—that made Kristen spin toward it with a gasp.

The front door was opening slowly, as if the house were opening its mouth in a yawn.

She felt no surprise; she'd expected it.

Lightning flashed, illuminating Kristen's surroundings, which were dissolving like the chalk drawing and spilling over the ground, flooding toward her in a rush, surrounding her and pushing her back...

... through the gate...

... toward the house...

Groaning with dread, Kristen stumbled up the walk that led to the open door. The slimy substance that chased her toward the house—a mix of dark colors and unidentifiable lumps—slapped against the steps as she lifted her lead-heavy feet onto the porch. It rose higher, as if in pursuit, and she looked briefly into the deadly-cold darkness beyond the open door, then stepped inside.

There were suddenly voices behind her... the voices of several singing children...

"One... two... Freddy's coming for you..."

Kristen spun around and saw them in the yard. They stood stiffly as the multicolored slime oozed around their thin legs and rose quickly.

"... three... four... better lock the door..."

The thick substance made smacking sounds as it covered the porch and rushed toward the open door. Kristen whimpered, reached out to shut the door, but thought better of it; whatever lay behind her might be worse than what she was seeing.

She turned and looked into the dimly-lit house. Tattered curtains fluttered in the wind that blew through broken windows, and cobwebs trembled in dark corners. To the left, a staircase led into utter blackness and the house was filled with the silence of a tomb, until—

—a heavy clattering began at the top of the stairs, and Kristen cried out as an old, rusted tricycle tumbled down the stairs as slow as honey, hitting a step, turning slowly through the air, hitting another step, turning again...

The door slammed shut behind her.

"No!" she cried, spinning around and slapping her hand on the doorknob. She turned it, pulled the door open, threw herself out of the house and—

—it was all gone—the front yard, the slime, the children—and Kristen found herself, instead, inside the house once again, looking into the dusty decay of a house that had long been abandoned. She

turned back, looked through the still open door and saw the same room on the other side.

He's trapped you, she thought. *You're on his turf.*

She moved toward the door, but it slammed shut. When she tried to open it again, the knob would not budge.

"Be calm, Kristen," she muttered unconvincingly. "Be calm."

She turned and looked past the staircase down the long hallway that ended in complete blackness. At the front of the hall and to the right, a door opened slowly with a long wavery groan. With nowhere else to go, Kristen moved forward and stepped through the door.

Old floorboards creaked beneath her feet as she entered the familiar living room. As the wind blew through the trees outside the dirty windows, shadows danced through the cobwebs and over the dusty sheets that covered the furniture.

Lightning turned the room an electric white, illuminating the yellowed old paintings on the walls: corpse-thin children with distended bellies, swollen lips, and eyes deepset in shadows, playing jacks and marbles and catch in graveyards and garbage dumps. Kristen gaped at the paintings as the lightning flickered, and she clutched her icy chest when she saw—

—the shadow of a hand with long knifelike fingers sweeping back and forth over the wall.

The lightning died with a growl of thunder, leaving Kristen alone in the dark, her heart strafing her rib cage with machine-gun fire. Her lungs seized up and she couldn't draw a breath. When lightning flashed again, Kristen spun around with a scream trapped in her throat to see—

—a bony tree branch scraping the window.

Her body rushing with adrenaline, Kristen relaxed and sighed, even smiled a little as she moved toward the window.

Thunder hit like an earthquake.

The window shattered and snowflakes of glass blew inward. The gust of wind that followed hit Kristen like a cannonball in the pit of her stomach, knocking her backward and—

—down a set of metal stairs to a cold cement floor covered with grit and slime. She landed sprawled on her back and lay still a moment,

staring up at the dripping pipes that twisted and tangled like one continuous intestine inside a gargantuan body.

The boiler room...

"No," Kristen breathed as she scrambled to her feet and looked around, all her relief gone. She felt as trapped as a caged animal. "N-Nuh-*No,* he's not here, he's... dead. Dead. He's not *here,* he's *dead,* Freddy's—"

She was interrupted by a sound...

The teeth-grinding skree of metal scraping metal nearby...

Freddy's knives...

Kristen forced the scream out the way she might force herself to vomit: *"Noooo!* Kincaid! Joey! Help me! *Help* me! Help—"

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"—meeee!"

Kincaid's drooping head snapped up and he gasped, startled and disoriented. He was in his bedroom, seated at his desk, where he'd dozed off while reading a sports magazine.

The room was silent except for the soft wet snoring of Kincaid's mongrel, Jason, sleeping fitfully on the bed.

Kincaid frowned, looking around slowly and wondering what had awakened him so suddenly. Had his mother called him from down the hall? No, he was sure it hadn't been Mom; if *she* had called him, she'd *still* be shouting his name, until he answered.

No... it had come from... from—

—the mirror. He looked at his reflection in the rectangular mirror to his left. A thin film of perspiration glistened on his black skin, making his dark blue T-shirt cling to the hard muscles of his back and shoulders.

Uh-uh, he thought, *sure wasn't no* mirror *woke me up, no* way. *I'm through with* that *shit, I'm not gonna—*

The mirror shimmered ever so slightly.

Jason woke, got to his feet and stared at the mirror with his scruffy black ears perked. After a moment the dog hopped to the floor with a whimper and scurried under the bed.

The smooth surface of the looking glass began to swirl as if being sucked down a drain, and Kincaid's chair began to tremble beneath his heavy muscular frame.

"Oh, shit," he whispered, "I'm asleeee—"

Before he finished the word, Kincaid was sucked out of his chair and across the room into the whirlpool of spinning reflections. He screamed in an uncharacteristically high voice—a voice he'd be ashamed of under normal circumstances—flailing his arms and legs as he fell and fell and fell until—

—he landed with the painlessness of dreams on a hard wet surface. He blinked, shook his head with a jerk, and looked up into a pair of wide frightened blue eyes.

"Awww, *shit,* Kristen," Kincaid groaned, getting to his feet, "not again. I thought we—"

She held up a palm: "Shh! *Listen."*

Rolling his eyes, Kincaid listened a moment. "I don't hear *nothin'*. What's yo—"

A sound... metal against metal... clinking... scraping...

Kincaid's back stiffened. It *couldn't* be. They were *through* with all of this... with *him*. It had *ended,* and there was no reason for Kristen to pull him into her dreams anymore. He tried to bury his fear with anger, but—

—he heard the sound again.

Kincaid spun around.

Several feet away, about a dozen pulley chains dangled from above in the musty darkness; drops of moisture clung to their links and, as the chains swayed gently, the rusted hooks at the end of each one clanked and scraped together.

Kincaid faced Kristen again, genuinely angry with his friend this time. "You are one spooked chick, you know that?"

Her shoulders drooped with relief and she smiled, started to speak, but froze and gasped, "Listen!" as—

—footsteps scraped over the grimy concrete and a tall lanky figure with a long pale face emerged from the shadows.

Kincaid stumbled backward with a doglike yelp and Kristen cried out as—

—Joey stepped between them.

Trying to cover his fear immediately with cool nonchalance, Kincaid snapped, "She pulled *you* into this too?"

"Joey, thank God!" Kristen gasped. "I thought—"

"Thought what?" Joey said, irritated. "Thought you'd drag us in here?"

Kincaid felt better knowing he was not alone in his indignation, and he and Joey glared at Kristen.

"I-It's Freddy," she stammered. "He's here."

"Chill *out,* Kristen," Kincaid snapped. "Freddy's *dead.* Buried and consecrated. We *won,* remember? We watched him *fry.* He disappeared right in *front* of us!"

She shook her head insistently. "No, no. He's come back... to get us."

Joey stepped toward her angrily. "No way, Kincaid's right, Fred Krueger is history. C'mere..." He took her hand and led her to the boiler. It hunkered in a corner like a great metal beast with a fat rusted belly. "Look," he said, jerking the stubborn latch and swinging open the iron door, "the boiler's cold. See for yourself."

Kristen flinched as Joey positioned her in front of the yawning boiler and lifted her arm to press her hand to the cold iron. She moved her hand over it and looked inside cautiously. After a moment she faced them, her hand still on the boiler.

"I don't know, guys," she said quietly. "I still have the feeling—"

There was an abrupt sound within the boiler, and something shot out the open door in a blur of white fangs and pink gums and—

—Kincaid recognized his dog Jason as—

—the growling animal closed its jaws on Kristen's forearm and knocked her to the floor and—

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—Kincaid jerked his head off his desk again and looked around his bedroom.

The mirror was still and lifeless.

The muffled rumble of the dishwasher came from the kitchen.

Kincaid looked over his shoulder at his bed. Jason lay curled on the covers, dozing. The dog lifted his head lazily.

Blood was smeared on Jason's muzzle.

Kincaid whistled softly through his teeth as—

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—Joey awoke with a start, his water bed sloshing beneath him.

As he wobbled on the mattress's gentle wakes, Joey clutched the covers and looked around his room quickly, reassuring himself that he was awake. Then he buried his face in his palms and groaned as—

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—Kristen threw her covers off and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, her breasts heaving with each heavy breath. A throbbing pain crawled up her left arm. She lifted it slowly, dreading what she might see.

Blood dribbled from the small puncture marks left by the dog's sharp teeth...

Chapter Two

The top was down on Kristen's Volkswagen Rabbit and the sun warmed her as she slowed to a stop in front of Alice Johnson's house.

A bird sang from the branches of an elm as Kristen got out of the car. Down the street a dog barked and a child laughed a long giddy laugh. It was a pleasant neighborhood, modest, but well kept and attractive.

Just the kind of neighborhood Freddy likes...

Kristen wrestled the thought down into the dark basement of her mind, from where it had come. It wasn't even nine o'clock yet, and the day seemed endless because, since she woke up, Kristen had been fighting to keep her mind off last night's dream.

It didn't mean anything, she'd told herself again and again. *It was just a dream, that's all. Maybe I* didn't *actually pull Kincaid and Joey into it, and maybe I hit my arm on the nightstand when I woke up, and—*

—maybe Freddy's really *back...*

Her longsleeved shirt couldn't hide the slight bulge of gauze wrapped around her left arm. She fingered the bandage as she walked around to the side door of Alice's house and rang the bell.

Dennis Johnson opened the door, distractedly tying his tie.

"How are you, Mr. Johnson?" Kristen asked, stepping into the kitchen.

His only response was a cold and weary sidelong glance as he turned to the kitchen counter and poured a healthy shot of vodka into a glass of tomato juice.

"Mm, that's nice," Kristen muttered sarcastically.

He seldom spoke to her—or to *anyone*—and always looked as if he were on the verge of breaking into an angry tirade. Ever since Mrs. Johnson's death after a long fight with cancer almost two years earlier, Mr. Johnson had closed up tighter than a triple-locked strongbox. His only friend was alcohol, and he wore his hangovers like long pale masks.

"Hi, Kristen," Alice said, entering the kitchen. "Rick'll be down in a sec."

Mr. Johnson gave his daughter a frowning once-over and asked sternly. "You going out dressed like *that?"*

Alice's red hair fell to her shoulders in flat lifeless strands, and she wore no makeup; her poorly matched clothes were baggy and made her look shapeless.

Closing her eyes, bracing herself, Alice hugged her books to her breasts and asked, "What's wrong with me *this* time?"

"Um, I'll just wait outside," Kristen muttered, embarrassed.

"No, don't," Mr. Johnson drawled sarcastically. *"You're* a pretty girl, Kristen. Maybe *you* can help her." Shaking his head disgustedly, he turned away as the girls walked out.

Kristen ached for Alice; she wasn't a homely girl by *any* means, but no one besides Kristen and Alice's older brother Rick ever told her that. She never wore makeup or fixed her hair, and gave no thought to her clothes, but those things were incidental; all Alice *really* lacked was confidence and self-respect.

Outside, after Mr. Johnson slammed the kitchen door behind them, something clambered overhead and the girls looked up to see Rick crawling out his bedroom window. He hugged the branch of a tree beside the house, shimmied halfway down, and dropped the last three feet to land, smiling, in front of Kristen and Alice. He gave Kristen a quick kiss and she felt a slight tingle rush through her. They had been going steady for about three months now, and a simple kiss still held excitement. Rick was tall and slender with dark hair moussed into spikes; his face always gave the impression he was about to tell a wicked joke, and his eyes never lost their twinkle, even when he was upset.

"Something wrong with the stairs?" Kristen laughed.

Rick shook his head, putting his arm around her. "Avoid-all-contact Day."

"What?"

"When Dad's popping aspirins like Life Savers, it's Avoid-all-contact Day."

As if on cue, the door jerked open and Mr. Johnson glared out, wearing a little tomato-juice mustache. "What're you, waiting for a *limo?"*

Rick bounced up the steps, put his hands on his dad's shoulders and, mocking Ricky Ricardo, chirped, "Hokay, hahnee, hime off to-dee clahb!" then kissed Mr. Johnson on the mouth.

Sweeping his hand over his lips, Mr. Johnson scowled and slammed the door again.

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Kristen pulled into the student parking lot of Springwood High School and parked in a slot beside Debbie Steven's charcoal-gray Mazda.

Alice Johnson looked on admiringly as Debbie stood—*No,* Alice thought, *it's more like a pose*—beside her car, applying lipstick while looking into a small compact mirror. Hard rock boomed from the speakers of the car.

Debbie was not classically attractive—unlike Kristen, whose blond hair, blue eyes, and sculpted face made her beauty difficult to hide—but she did a good job of making up for it. A short tight skirt, black cropped top, and black leather jacket showed off her curves, while plenty of makeup and full, curly, bronze-tinted hair improved her plain, rather blocky features.

Alice had a great deal of respect for Debbie, who came from what Alice suspected Debbie thought was the wrong side of the tracks; she lived on the south side of Springwood, where her father ran a junkyard and her grossly obese mother sat around eating M&M's and Dorritos all day; so, in an effort to put that behind her, she tended to overcompensate by being a gorgeous social butterfly. Debbie was a little rough around the edges, but Alice liked and admired her for being able to rise above her disadvantaged background.

"All right, anybody have trig this semester?" Debbie called as Kristen killed the ignition.

"What happened?" Rick asked as they got out of the Rabbit.

"I had a conflict. Homework or *Dynasty*. *Dynasty* won."

"A sad story," Rick said. "Soaps'll kill you."

Alice's attention was caught by a familiar red pickup, as it pulled into the lot, and she leaned against Kristen's car and watched it park. There was a flutter in her chest as Dan Jordan got out of the truck in tight blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and a green and white letter jacket, his short black hair tossed slightly by the gentle breeze.

Debbie took notice, too, cocking a brow and purring. "Mmmm-*mm,* we're talkin' one major-league *hunk."*

Alice watched as he slammed the truck door and... and... and—

—he turned to her and smiled as their eyes met, ambling toward her with a boyish grin. As he neared, Alice grinned, tilted her head and purred—exactly as Debbie had—"Mmm-mm, *you know, you are one major-league* hunk," *then put a hand on his waist and stepped closer.*

He chuckled and looked away bashfully. "Well, um, thuh-thank you, Alice, but-um—"

"Earth to Alice," Rick singsonged, waving a hand before her face. "Earth to Alice. Hey, you spacing again?"

Embarrassed, she whispered, "Rick, *please."* It was just another daydream, the kind her dad was always complaining about... the kind of thing for which he seemed to despise her so. Alice was relieved when the sputter of Sheila Kopecky's Vespa scooter drew attention from her.

"All *right,"* Debbie said. "I think I see salvation."

Sheila was a black girl with light chocolatey skin, nerdy thick glasses, and hair pulled back in a ponytail. She parked her scooter, got off and unstrapped the bundle of books and papers from behind the seat.

"How can you ride that health hazard?" Debbie asked. "It's no wonder you have asthma."

"Asthma is an *inherited* condition," Sheila said. "If you read a book now and then, you might know something."

"Speaking of books, isn't trig your favorite?"

Sheila rolled her eyes. *"Dynasty* again? Girl, do us a favor. Get a VCR." From a pocket, she produced an asthma inhaler, slipped it between her lips and took a few puffs.

From a few yards away Terence Brady, a cocky black jock with a bulging T-shirt, called, "Hey, baby, you're sucking on the wrong nozzle."

Sheila turned away, embarrassed, but Debbie stepped forward, lips curled in a harsh sneer, her fist clutching her lunch bag a little harder, and replied, "Hey-yo, *needledick,* I bet you're the only male on campus suffering from penis envy!"

Alice laughed as Brady stared in confusion, then walked away.

Sheila released a staccato laugh and patted Debbie on the shoulder. "All *right,* girl, I owe you one."

"Really?" Debbie asked, reaching into her bag and removing a piece of dried fruit. "Well, how about—" She stopped, cried out and dropped the piece of fruit, shuddering as she stepped back.

Everyone, including Alice, stepped forward and looked down at the fruit. A large roach skittered over it, antennae quivering this way and that.

"Eewww!" Debbie cried, slamming her heel on the insect and twisting her foot again and again. "That is *sooo* disgusting!" She continued twisting her foot and stomped a few times.

"Hey, Supergirl," Rick chuckled, "I think it's dead. Give a bug a break, huh?"

She stopped, stepped back, her face still twisted in disgust, shuddered again, then turned away.

Alice was surprised. As tough as she was, Debbie was *still* afraid of a measly little cockroach.

***

Kincaid and Joey met Kristen at her locker, and she could tell by the looks on their faces that last night's dream had not been just *any* dream.

"Hi, guys," she said hesitantly.

"Hi, guys?" Kincaid snorted. "That's all you got to say after last night?"

"Look, I'm *telling* you, he's coming *back,"* she whispered.

Kincaid relaxed a little, became more sympathetic. "Listen, little sister, we know you got this freako talent for bringing folks into your dreams, but we don't *need* it anymore. Time to live like regular people."

"Yeah, let it rest," Joey agreed. "'Sides, who knows, you might stir him back up if you keep going in. Kincaid and I'll help, we're still a team. But we *all* have better things to dream about."

"You got *that* right, signed and sealed," Kincaid added, slapping Joey's palm.

She looked at them, wanting to believe, but couldn't. "Then what about *this?"* she asked, rolling up her sleeve over the bandage.

Kincaid rolled his eyes. "Dat don't mean *dick*. My dog's just like *me*. Drag him into your crazy dream and he gets *wild!"*

On his way down the hall Rick waved, and Kristen and the guys noticed.

"Here comes your boyfriend," Kincaid chuckled. "Can't *he* give you a good night's sleep?"

Rick put his arm around Kristen and said, "We don't kiss and tell. How about *you* guys?"

Kincaid was ready with an angry comeback, but Joey led him away by the arm, and Kristen watched them disappear down the crowded hall.

"Those guys are kind of, um, spooky," Rick said in her ear.

"Then you must think I'm a total *freak,"* she laughed.

"I go back and forth." He kissed her forehead.

Kristen looked down the hall again. "No, they're okay. We've... been through a lot together..."

Chapter Three

It was the time of day Alice hated the most: time for Dad to come home. She was standing at the sink washing dishes when she heard his car drive up. It ran over the garbage cans with a clatter; he was drunk again. Rick was in the garage practicing for his martial-arts class, and she heard his abrupt movements cease when Dad's car door slammed.

"First one of the day, scout's honor," Dad said apologetically as he came in through the kitchen door. He swayed slightly as he walked. "I'm late, I know. Damned contracts..."

"We waited a long time," Alice said quietly.

Rick shuffled in and added, "But we gave up. As usual."

Taking a salad bowl out of the refrigerator, Alice followed her dad into the dining room and began serving dinner.

He looked at the salad before him and snapped, "You call this vegetation a *meal* after a ten-hour workday? What the hell am I? A *rabbit?* Christ, Alice, can't you try to *think* a little more?"

Heading back into the kitchen, Alice stopped with her back to her dad and... and... and—

—she faced him angrily, rushed forward and slapped a hand on the table, speaking through clenched teeth: "Yeah, I can think! *I can think of how* tired *I am of watching you drink your life away! I can think of how* sick *I am of you taking Momma's death out on* me!"

He gaped at her in shock, mouth hanging open, and—

—Dad said, "Am I speaking in *tongues?* Alice, I'm *talking* to you. Are you awake, or *what?"*

"Dad, don't start," Rick said quietly.

"Start what? Telling the little daydreamer to wake up? It's long overdue." He got up and went for his coat. "Hell with this. Aggravation I *don't* need."

Alice stood at the kitchen sink as long as she could. She listened to him storm out, listened to him drive away. Then the tears came, and she hurried to her room...

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Kincaid had tried for hours to do his homework, but he couldn't concentrate. He'd finally undressed, put on his sweat pants and T-shirt, and laid down on the bed. Sleep came as easily as concentration, so he grabbed up a handful of darts and tossed them from the bed to the board on the wall across the room, trying hard not to think... about Kristen... about her dreams... and, most of all, about *him*...

About Freddy.

But it wasn't easy.

As the darts thunked against the board, Kincaid's bedroom door creaked open slowly and he froze. Kincaid sat up on the bed, startled, and saw—

—a shadow on the bedroom floor... it *looked* like the shadow of a tilted pointy hat on a long head...

It was only Jason.

Kincaid sighed and slapped the mattress. "C'mon, Jason, c'mere, boy!"

Jason hopped onto the bed and curled up between Kincaid's legs. The dog's warmth made him feel a little better, a little safer. He put the darts on the nightstand and leaned his head back on the pillow... closed his eyes... and—

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—he jerked awake again. But it was dark, now—*very* dark—and Kincaid reached for the light on the nightstand.

His hand struck hard cold metal. It was all around him—below him, above him, and at each side—and his breathing quickened, his stomach sick with panic as he pounded at the surface above him. It rattled, clanged, and—

—opened. He was in the trunk of a car.

Cold night air wafted in as Kincaid sat up in the trunk. Outside, there was only the black night sky above and battered old cars all around, for as far as he could see.

"Hey," he said, feeling more and more afraid, "this ain't *my* dreamland." He climbed out of the trunk and looked around. He was in an old wrecking yard. Cars were stacked like corpses outside of Auschwitz. Kincaid sucked in a deep breath and cried, "Kristen! *Kristen!* If you're here, I'm gonna *pound* your ass!"

There was no reply, only a familiar scratching. It was the sound of Jason's paws pattering through dirt. The dog was a few yards away, trotting toward Kincaid. Jason stopped and stared at him.

"Jason!" He was relieved to see a familiar sight. But as he neared the dog, Jason's lip pulled back over sharp teeth and the dog growled softly. "Hey... it's *me,* Jason."

The dog turned away from him and began digging furiously in the dirt, paws pedaling so fast, they were nearly a blur. Kincaid drew nearer, but cautiously, no longer trusting his pet. The ground began to collapse beneath Jason's swiping paws, and Kincaid was struck with a sudden feeling of dread. He rushed forward to stop the dog's digging, but Jason spun on him and snapped, growled, and—

—Jason lifted his hind leg to piss, but instead of urine, a stream of fire shot from between the dog's legs, and the hole Jason had dug ignited. Jason bounded away from the fire, yelping, then stopped and turned back, body tensed, ready to run away.

Kincaid watched as the flames rose six... seven... ten feet into the air; the ground beneath him began to tremble and crack, and a red glow oozed from the opening as if Hell itself were being revealed. The flames died down as the ground separated, leaving a red glowing pit where there had once been a small hole.

Kincaid and Jason moved slowly toward the crevice and looked over the edge.

A pile of human bones lay in the flickering glow; a foot or so away from them lay a hat. It was a very *familiar* hat.

The bones quivered... moved... then, with frightening speed—

—the bones slid together, joints thunking as they were rejoined, separated ribs clattering as they became whole, vertebrae snapping into a column, fingers clicking together, teeth rattling back into their sockets, and—

—Jason barked fearfully, backing up several steps, then turned and ran away as—

—tissue began to form on the bones; muscles melted together and veins and arteries appeared in trails over the glistening substance, then skin, spreading like moisture over a windowpane, covered the body completely as eyes rose from within the skull to fill the empty sockets and—

—Freddy smiled up at Kincaid from the pit and sneered, "You shouldn't've buried me. *I'm... not... dead."* He reached for his hat and dusted it off.

Kincaid wasted no time. He turned and ran for the wall of rusty battered cars, sidling between two of them, then climbing onto another, hiding behind an old crumpled Vega, where he could watch without being seen.

Flames shot from the pit, and the earth rumbled again as it closed. When the flames died out, Freddy stood where they had once burned. He lifted his right hand—razor-sharp knives extended from each finger—and slid the blades together as he chuckled. They played a deadly note. He walked slowly toward the wall of cars behind which Kincaid hid.

Kincaid closed his eyes a moment and summoned the extraordinary strength that came to him only in dreams, then waited until Freddy was standing in just the right spot beneath him.

Kincaid hooked his hands beneath the frame of the Vega and heaved.

The car tumbled through the air and landed flat on Freddy.

After a moment Kincaid whooped with joy: "Take *that,* muthah-fuckahhh!" His words echoed through the graveyard of automobiles. He jumped to the ground and grinned at the place where Freddy had stood, waiting for his dream to end.

It didn't.

The headlights of every dead car around him came on, shining with an unnatural brightness. Horns wailed like the voices of dying children.

Kincaid spun around and around, thinking, *It's over, it's over! How come I'm not* awake *yet?*

Metal scraped piercingly behind him, and Kincaid spun around to see Freddy emerging from between two cars, dragging his knives along the rusted body of one as he grinned and rasped, "One down... two to go..."

Kincaid tried to run, but Freddy was faster. The blades glittered in the light of the cars' headlights an instant before they plunged into Kincaid's gut. Freddy pushed them upward as he flashed his rotting teeth. His breath smelled like decayed meat in Kincaid's nostrils.

Kincaid felt blood rising in his throat, and it sprayed from his mouth as he gurgled, "Kiss... my... ass. I'll... see you... in *hellllll...*"

Freddy tilted his head, perversely jovial, and said, "Tell 'em, *Freddy* sent yuh!" His hellish laugh echoed in Kincaid's ears as—

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—his eyes snapped open moments before his death. Jason was hunkered beside him, whining pitifully. Kincaid clutched his stomach, expecting to find blood, but there was nothing.

The dog licked Kincaid's cheek as he tried to call Kristen's name.

He died first...

***

"At least *you* guys don't complain about *your* food," Alice muttered as she sprinkled fish food into the small aquarium in her room. Capping the food again, she went to her vanity. Its large mirror was almost completely obscured by photographs taped to the glass, some overlapping others, some covered entirely. They were pictures of Sheila and Debbie, Kristen and Rick, Rick and herself, but her favorites were the pictures of Alice, Rick, and their mother together. There were a *lot* of those. She'd been so pretty before she got sick, before the cancer began chewing up her insides. Somewhere on the mirror were a couple of pictures of her dad, but she didn't look for them. They were probably covered up, anyway.

"Sorta defeats the purpose, doesn't it?" Rick asked, coming into the room.

"What!"

"The mirror. You can't see yourself in it."

"That's the point. I don't want to." She went to her bed and sat on the edge. "You know, if Mom were still alive, Dad wouldn't treat us like he does."

"Nah, c'mon, his mind is doing the freestyle in Cuervo Gold. He doesn't mean it."

"You know, sometimes I really *want* to be what he wants, and other times I just don't care. The problem is, when I look in the mirror, I'm never what *I* want to be."

"That's 'cause you can't see yourself, like I said. You know, if you took a good close look, you might surprise yourself. You've just gotta... chase a few dreams. Find out what you *want* to be, then go for it."

She shook her head distractedly.

"It's all in your head."

"What?"

"Your mind pictures you doing something, and your body reacts. Like this." He stood straight, kicked a leg high into the air while jerking back his elbows, and shouted. *"Fight!* See? Like that. C'mon, you try it."

"Me? I can't do that."

"Sure you can." He pulled her from the bed and stood her in the center of the room. "Okay... like this." He repeated the kick. "Now, go ahead."

She gave it a half-hearted try and nearly fell over.

Rick gave her a polite Japanese bow and said, "Ah, Alice-san, you must have balance. Now, try again."

With the next kick her shoe flew across the room and plopped into the aquarium.

Alice laughed and buried her face in Rick's chest.

"Well, you've got pretty good aim," he chuckled. He put his arms around her and gave her a squeeze. "So you're not a martial-arts expert, so what? You've just gotta keep shopping around, and when you find what you want to be, give it your all. Okay?"

"That's easy for you to say. You've got a personality."

"So do you," he said, kissing her forehead. "You're the only one who doesn't *know* it yet."

***

Joey lay on his water bed, idly sloshing the mattress with his foot. MTV was on, the volume low, but Joey ignored it in favor of the poster on the wall across the room. It was a picture of a beautiful blonde stretched out on a tigerskin rug. She wore a yellow bikini that concealed little, and she looked directly at Joey with promise and invitation.

"Mm-mm," he breathed, locking his hands behind his head and allowing himself to relax—he even began to doze a little—as he stared at the poster... wishing... imagining... dreaming...

He thought of how she might feel and smell, how she might taste, and he had a nearly perfect image of her standing beside his bed when—

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—a jarring movement startled him from his fantasy and made him sit up. The water bed was sloshing furiously, almost as if something were... *inside* the mattress!

Joey turned, clutched the bottom sheet and pulled it away from the mattress, looked through the transparent vinyl, and gasped when he saw—

—a figure swimming in the water beneath him, backed by a soft glow. It was a woman... a *naked* woman... and she *looked* like...

No, Joey thought, *couldn't be, it* couldn't *be!*

He looked up at the poster. The girl was gone; all that was left on the tigerskin was the yellow bikini lying in a tiny heap.

Inside the mattress the girl moved gracefully, her blond hair flowing around her head liquidly, her small firm breasts pressed flat to the vinyl as her lips silently formed his name: *Jooo-eeey...*

Joey knew he was dreaming. The poster girl had come to him in his dreams before, but she'd never been inside his *bed.* "What a great bed!" Joey laughed, getting on his hands and knees, pressing a palm

to one breast. He felt it beneath the vinyl, but for only a moment, then—

—the girl began to sink, fading into the soft glow that came from deep within the water.

"Wait! Come back!" he called. But only water slurped quietly inside the mattress. Joey sighed and started to put the sheet back when he saw—

—slight movement deep in the water again. Something was nearing the surface, swimming upward quickly, and a hand reached toward Joey, but it wasn't just *any* hand, and it wasn't *her* hand, because—

—there were knives extending from the fingers, coming up faster and faster until—

—they sliced cleanly through the vinyl and Freddy rose out of the water with a great splash, wrapping his arm around Joey's neck smoothly and holding him close in a deadly embrace.

Joey felt as if the bottom of his stomach had fallen out as he struggled helplessly. Defeat overwhelmed him and he cried out in a childlike voice: *"Nooo! Nuh-nooooo!"*

"How's *this* for a wet dream?" Freddy sneered, his laughter filling the room as Joey continued to fight.

"Help! Kristen! Help me!"

"Two down... one to gooo..."

"Kristen, plee-heeze hel—"

Freddy pulled Joey into the water and they went down... farther and farther... until Joey's lungs burned for breath and his skull felt as if it were being crushed, and then—

—there was nothing.

Not even dreams—

***

When Joey's mom came into his room to say good night, she clicked her tongue when she saw the television was still playing that wretched MTV. She couldn't understand the attraction...

"*This* garbage," she muttered, turning it off. She turned to his bed. The covers were in a heap. "Joey?" she said quietly. "C'mon, give your old mom a kiss." She went to the bed and carefully pulled the covers back and saw that—

—the bottom sheet was gone. So was Joey. She whipped the sheets back and—

—her scream sounded through the entire house as she stared at her son's dead body—*inside* the water-bed mattress...

Chapter Four

On a bench in front of the school the next morning, Kristen's hand trembled as she lit a cigarette. Sleep had been scarce the night before and she'd had too much coffee before coming to school.

The night had been filled with voices—Kincaid's and Joey's—calling her name.

She'd been looking for the boys since she'd arrived that morning but hadn't found them, and her stomach was tangled in an anxious knot.

When a hand touched her shoulder, Kristen jerked around to find Alice. "There you are," Alice said. "Where are you this morning? Rick's been looking all over for you."

Kristen clutched Alice's arm. "Have you seen Kincaid or Joey? I can't find them. *Anywhere."*

"I haven't seen them." Alice sat beside her.

"I called them, but no one answered. Not even their parents." When Alice frowned with concern, Kristen tried to calm herself. "We have matching luggage," she chuckled.

"Huh?"

"The bags under your eyes. I've got 'em, too, see? Nightmares?"

Alice nodded.

"God, I hate dreaming."

"I love to dream," Alice said. "I just hate the ones about my dad."

"You could do a lot worse, believe me." Kristen stamped out her cigarette. "How do you handle your dreams?"

Alice brightened. "My mom taught me when I was little. Ever heard of the dream master?"

"Sounds like a game-show host."

"No, really. It was like a teddy bear, or something. The 'guardian of good dreams.' Gave me confidence."

"You know his phone number?"

Alice laughed. "Sorry. There was a rhyme, I think. But I've forgotten it."

"So what do you do now?"

"Now I just try really hard to dream of someplace fun. Remember... *you're* in control. You are your own dream master."

Kristen was silent a moment. "I used to bring people into my dreams."

"You *what?"*

"When I had nightmares, I'd bring people in to help me." She could tell Alice was skeptical. "Never mind. It's kinda complicated." The bell rang through the campus, and Kristen stood, forced a smile. "Well, we better go before your brother starts a search party."

***

Kincaid and Joey had Mr. Bryson's English class with Kristen, and, as she walked down the hall with Rick and Alice, she prayed they would be there. If they weren't... well, she didn't know *what* she would do.

They were late and the class was already full, and when they walked in, everyone turned to see who was tardy. Kristen scanned the room quickly and gasped when she saw that—

—Kincaid's and Joey's desks were empty.

Kristen's heart froze.

She stumbled backward and tried to find her voice. "Kincaid... Joey... my God, he got them... oh, God, he *got* them!"

Rick grabbed her arm and hissed, "Kristen, what's the matter?"

She faced him and sputtered, "They're guh-gone, he *got* them, my Guh-God, he *got* them! *Killed* them!"

Alice stepped toward her and Rick tried to pull Kristen toward him. She spun away and threw herself toward the open door but tripped on Rick's foot and—

—she felt herself falling, saw the floor sweeping up to meet her, saw the doorjamb an instant before her skull cracked against it, and —

—the light around her began to fade and the voices of her classmates sounded more and more distant, until—

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—Kristen opened her eyes and looked up at the glaring fluorescent lights of the infirmary. The school nurse smiled down at her. The woman's face was square and homely, her dark hair in short curls; her watery brown eyes peered through owlish glasses, and she wore too much perfume.

"Feeling better now?" the nurse asked.

"Yuh-Yeah. I g-guess so. What happened?"

"You had quite a nasty bump." The nurse's voice was soft and prissy.

Kristen tried hard to focus her senses; when she remembered what had happened just before she bumped her head, she tried to sit up and blurted, "I gotta get outta here!"

The nurse pushed her down again. "You just stay put. You need your rest."

"No, no," Kristen hissed urgently. "You don't get it. He's *after* me..."

"Don't worry, honey. Everything's fine." The nurse smiled again, showing her small, ugly teeth, and turning away, hunching over a small chrome table. She fumbled with something for a moment.

Kristen tried to relax, but the light was so *bright*. And the room was so clean and neat and... *white*. With a jolt, she felt that something was suddenly very wrong and looked at the nurse suspiciously.

The woman's white uniform was stretched tight over her back and began to spread with bright red stains.

Kristen frowned, sat up and watched as the stains grew larger, almost as if... as if something were oozing through the material from underneath... something like—

—blood.

The nurse spun around quickly and held up an enormous syringe, and Kristen looked at her face to see that she was—

—*Freddy!*

He laughed deep in his chest and sneered, "Just lie back... I need to draw a little *blood!"*

Kristen screamed as she rolled off the examination table and—

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—her eyes snapped open as she lay on the examination table.

The school nurse smiled down at her, peering through owlish glasses, and said, "Feeling better now?"

Kristen took a deep breath and let relief wash through her.

This was the *real* school nurse; she was homely too... but she *wasn't* Freddy...

Chapter Five

Later that afternoon at the Crave Inn, Alice was just ending her shift as a waitress and was standing behind the register getting her things together when Dan walked in. She felt her throat constrict when he walked toward her, smiling.

"Hi," he said. "Is Rick around?"

"Um... no. Rick stayed late at school. K-Kristen wasn't feeling well."

"Ah. You are his sister, right?"

"Uh-huh. A-Alice."

"I'm Dan. Rick and I are supposed to go work out later. If he comes in, I'll be over there." He joined a couple of other guys at a corner table and Debbie hurried over to take his order.

Alice watched him dreamily for a while, until Sheila walked in and stepped in front of her, laughing. "Hunk alert! Hunk alert!"

Alice rolled her eyes and got her purse.

"Look, I can't wait around for you today," Sheila said. "I've gotta get to the library before it closes. *Killer* physics test tomorrow."

"I know. And *I'm* not ready."

Debbie came to the counter, scribbling on her order pad. "He is *so* cute," she whispered. "I wonder where he works out."

"Girl," Sheila said, "you know, there *is* life after exercise. Someday, you'll learn to appreciate my motto."

"And what's that?"

"Mind... over matter," she whispered dramatically, then laughed.

The bell over the door clanged as Rick hurried in with Kristen shuffling behind him. She looked as if she'd been crying.

"C'mon, Alice," Rick said urgently, "we've gotta get outta here."

"What's going on?"

He whispered, "Kincaid and Joey died last night."

"What! *How?"* Gooseflesh shriveled the back of Alice's neck when she remembered how concerned Kristen had been about them. Did she know something? Alice turned to Kristen and took her arm as Rick hurried over to Dan's table. "What happened?"

"Look," Kristen whispered, "you're gonna hear all kinds of stories, but I know what *really* happened." She began to cry softly. "How could I have let him get them... after all we've been through together... we were a *team*. I'm going to get that son of a *bitch."*

"Who?"

Kristen shook her head evasively and called, "C'mon, Rick, let's go."

Alice got her purse, tossing a wave to Debbie and Sheila, who looked puzzled—"I'll fill you in later," Alice assured them—and followed Rick and Kristen out, surprised to see Dan coming after her.

"Mind if I come?" he asked, looking a bit confused.

Alice shrugged bashfully, and they got into Rick's car. Dan sat in the back seat with her. As Rick pulled away from the diner, Alice asked, "Will somebody tell me what's going on?"

Kristen took a deep breath, as if composing herself, and asked, "Ever heard of Fred Krueger? *Freddy*... Krueger?"

"What, that creaky old town legend?" Dan laughed.

"It's *not* a legend. It's a true story. He was a child molester. A child *killer*. He lived on Elm street. Killed a lot of kids in an old abandoned boiler room. He used to torture them, then he'd... cut them up with a glove he'd made out of metal with long blades on the fingers. After he was finally caught, he was acquitted on a technicality. The parents on Elm Street weren't too happy about that. They didn't like the idea of a child killer living on the block, you know? So they all agreed to take care of him themselves. One night, they burned him alive. But... he wasn't gone." She wiped a few stray tears and sniffled before continuing. "Freddy came back in the nightmares of his killers' children... the Elm Street children he'd missed. And when he killed them in their dreams... they died in their sleep."

Dan cleared his throat and said hesitantly, "Well, um, look, you know, *everybody* has nightmares, but I—"

She looked at him over her shoulder. "You don't know what nightmares are. In *these* dreams, you play by Freddy's rules. Wake up or *die*. Freddy doesn't like to let anyone get away. We did once... Kincaid and Joey and I. That's why Freddy's back. And *that"*—she pointed out the window as Rick slowed to a stop in front of a large

rundown house with peeling paint and boarded windows—"is his house."

They all got out of the car and looked at the house from the sidewalk.

"Creepy house," Dan said.

"It's not just any house," Kristen replied, visibly shaken. "It's his *home*. That's where Kincaid and Joey and I fought him. There were others too... all people I'd met in... well, a place I stayed in once."

Alice had heard rumors that Kristen had stayed in a mental hospital for a while a couple years back. She never knew if it was true and thought it impolite to ask. Maybe she *had;* maybe that's the place she was referring to... and maybe, just *maybe,* it was about time for her to go back for a while. Then again... maybe not.

"We were the only ones to get out alive," Kristen said. "We watched him burn... we thought he was gone, but... Freddy never seems to go away... not for good. Now he's back. He got them, and I'm next. He's come for me."

Rick put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze. "C'mon, babe, let go of it. You're safe." He kissed her cheek and said, "Dan and I are gonna go look around a little."

They went up the walk and wandered around the house.

"'Now I lay me down to sleep...'" Alice whispered.

"What?"

"The dream master. I think I remember the rhyme. 'Now I lay me down to sleep... the master of dreams my soul to keep...' Sorry, I forget the rest. But it's like the prayer, you know?"

"That's okay. I don't *have* a prayer."

A horn honked and they turned to see Kristen's mother pulling up to the curb. She rolled down the window and shouted, "Kristen! Get the *hell* away from that *house!* Now! *Andele!"*

Rick hurried to Kristen's side and whispered, "You don't have to go if you don't want to. I'll stay with you."

"No. I should." She turned and forced a smile for Alice. The worry knitting her brow made her look older, haggard.

Alice felt a pang of pity for her friend and leaned forward to whisper in her ear. "What you said about pulling people into your

dreams? Well, if you ever need help... think of me. I'll come."

There were tears in Kristen's eyes as she walked away.

Rick watched her drive away, then said, "Well, what do you say we split."

They started for Rick's car when something on the ground caught Alice's eye. It was a colorful chalk drawing of the Krueger house, obviously drawn by a child. It looked faded, a little smeared, but the colors were still surprisingly bright.

"C'mon, Alice, let's go," Rick called.

She walked a few steps, then stopped. She'd seen something in the window of the chalk house... a figure... She turned to look again, but —

—the drawing was gone, the sidewalk clean.

Daydreaming again, she thought, getting into the car.

Chapter Six

Kristen was not hungry, but to make dinner even *more* unbearable, her mother was staring at her from across the dining room table. She nibbled a bit of chicken, but mostly just prodded her food with her fork, barely able to keep her eyes open. She'd felt exhausted since she got home.

"Something the matter with the cuisine?" her mother asked.

Kristen said nothing for a moment, then made no attempt to hide her mood. "Well, I'll tell you, Mom, when two of *your* friends die the same day, you let me know what it does to *your* appetite."

She relaxed a little, sighed.

Kristen sipped her lemonade; it tasted a little bitter, but it was cold and felt good doing down.

"You're just tired, Kristen. Don't think I haven't noticed you aren't sleeping. That's got to stop, you know."

She couldn't take any more. "Well, I'm sorry if I'm not very good company," Kristen said, standing, but—

—the room tilted, swayed, and she fell back into her chair, holding her head. Her eyes felt heavy, swollen, and her tongue seemed thick. She wanted to sleep but couldn't... *wouldn't.*

She straightened up in her chair, lifted her glass of lemonade to take another drink, and—

—it hit her. The lemonade's bitterness—her sudden drowsiness...

"Oh, God," she breathed. "What did you do?" She turned to her mother, who averted her eyes, and shouted again, *"What did you do?"*

"It'll ease your anxiety."

"What?"

"You need to *sleep,* Kristen."

She dropped the glass; it shattered and lemonade splashed everywhere as Kristen reached for her mother's purse on the corner of the table. Her mother grabbed for it, but Kristen was faster. She turned it over and spilled its contents in a heap.

A bottle of sleeping pills popped open and they skittered over the tabletop.

"Oh... my... *Gaaawwwd!"* Kristen screamed, stumbling away from the table.

"I'm *sorry,* honey, but—"

"Sorry?" Kristen faced her, leaning weakly against the wall. "Sorry that you and your tennis pals torched this pervert so he could chase me in my *dreams?* In case you haven't noticed, Mother, it's *his* fucking banquet, and *I'm* the last *course!"*

"Kristen," she snapped, pounding the table. "We went over this in therapy. You dealt with all of this in the hospital. It's *over!"*

"Mother... you've just murdered me. Take *that* to your fucking *therapy."* Ignoring her mother's shouts, Kristen staggered up the stairs, mumbling, *hissing,* to herself: "Nooo... can't end like thisss... I won't let it... *nooo..."*

In her room she locked the door and leaned against it, remembering what Alice had said.

... think of me... I'll come... think of me... I'll come...

Kristen stumbled toward the telephone on the nightstand but fell with her arms outstretched, just a few feet short. The pills were pulling her under like a deadly riptide sucking her away from a safe white beach, dragging her into an ocean of unconsciousness. Mustering all her strength, she called, "Allliiicce... Al... iccce..." But the name was only a breath. She rolled on her back, murmuring, "... fun... dream someplace fun... someplace fun..."

Her leaden eyes finally closed and she slipped into a heavy blackness that was interrupted only by—

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—the sound of water lapping against a shore.

Kristen opened her eyes and looked up at a bright blue sky. Sitting up, she found she was wearing a bathing suit and lying on a towel. A breeze whispered through palm trees all around her and sunlight glimmered on a broad body of water. A few yards away a little girl knelt on the shore building a sand castle. It was large and detailed,

rather elaborate for a girl so small. The girl smiled and waved, Kristen waved back and laid back on her towel. But she frowned…

It wasn't a sand *castle*. It was a *house*.

It was *his* house.

Kristen sat up quickly but the little girl was gone. She looked all around, but she was alone on the beach. Only the castle—*house,* Kristen corrected herself—remained on the shore. Except…

Something in the water caught Kristen's attention. A flash of light, a ripple of movement…

She sat up straighter and squinted, following the small moving object. It almost looked like a… yes, a *shark's* fin. Leaning forward, Kristen saw it glint again, like metal, as it cut through the water, zigzagging a few times, then—

—it took a sharp turn and increased its speed, heading straight for the beach. As it drew nearer it became more detailed, and Kristen could see that—

—it *was* made of metal, and it was *not* a shark's fin. Seconds before it reached the beach Kristen realized, with a bone-deep chill, that the object was four razor-sharp blades in ascending height slicing through the water toward her, closer… closer… until—

—they hit the shore and kicked up a burst of sand as they cut through the ground with ease, heading straight for the sand castle, straight for Kristen, until—

—it hit the sand castle and an explosion sent a cloud of sand into the air and sent Kristen scrambling backward, trying to get to her feet, but she froze when she saw—

—a figure in the slowly clearing mist of scattered sand…

Freddy.

She was paralyzed with fear as he walked toward her, his grin filled with promises of pain and torture. When she was finally able to stand —

—the sand beneath her weakened suddenly and her bare feet sank into the ground. She was buried to her knees by the time she looked down at the undulating ground beneath her. She was not simply sinking… the sand was *sucking* her down, and—

—Freddy was coming closer.

"No!" Kristen shouted, struggling uselessly as she was sucked deeper, as the sand rose to her waist... her breasts...

Freddy stood beside her, blanketing her with his shadow, and grinned. He lifted his foot, held it above her, then lowered it slowly until it was touching the top of her head. He pushed and—

—Kristen fell through the sand into nothingness, bracing herself for a fall. When nothing happened, she opened her eyes, found herself on her hands and knees in a dimly-lighted room. An *upside-down* room.

No, she thought, feeling dizzy, *the room isn't upside down... I'm on the ceiling!*

She defied gravity, clinging to the ceiling of Freddy's living room like a fly. Quickly gaining her bearings, Kristen crawled on all fours, slowly and carefully, across the ceiling to the wall. Expecting to fall, she continued down the wall, cutting diagonally toward a door. She reached down, turned the knob, and threw herself through the doorway and landed—

—in the boiler room.

"Please, God, *no!"* she screamed.

The room glowed a fiery red and steam hissed from between the pipes. She stood and looked around her and stiffened when she saw Freddy standing in front of the open boiler across from her; deadly flames danced inside the boiler behind him.

He grinned, chuckled, and swiped the air with his razors.

Rage bubbled inside Kristen and she cried defiantly, "We beat you *before!"* Summoning the power that had saved her in dreams past, she rushed toward him, jumped into the air, flipped smoothly and slammed her feet into his chest, then rolled away.

Freddy sprawled to the floor but got up quickly, his grin replaced by an angry scowl. "But you're all alone now," he growled, advancing toward her. "The laaaast Elm Street *brat*. Why don't you call in one of your *friends?"*

"Never!" she shouted, determined not to be responsible for any more deaths.

Moving closer, Freddy screeched his blades down a pipe and sneered, "Why don't you reach out and *touch* someone?" Closer

still... "Don't you want some *help,* Kristen?"

Yes, she thought, *I don't want to be alone, I don't...*

"No!" she cried, backing away from him. "I won't do it!"

... think of me... I'll come, Alice had said... *think of me... I'll come...*

"No!" she shouted again as Freddy drew close enough for her to see the individual burn scars on his ravaged face and the rust—or dried blood—on his blades.

"You want to, Kristen," he hissed.

Her back pressed against a wall of pipes.

"I *knoowww* you want to."

She could smell his breath, and the blades were reaching toward her face, her throat, and—

—she screamed, *"Aaaaliiice!"*

There was a clatter above them and Alice's limp body fell, landing on top of Freddy and flattening him to the floor. Alice immediately began crawling, her face wide with panic and confusion. Kristen clutched Alice's arms and dragged her away from Freddy, helped her to her feet.

"I'm sorry!" Kristen shouted. "Go back! Get out!" She slapped her confused friend hard in the face. "Wake up and *get out of here!"*

Alice looked around her, eyes widening in horror, until she saw Freddy. She looked like she wanted to scream but was too scared.

He stood a few yards away and laughed, "How sweet. Fresh meat..."

He rushed forward, reaching for Alice, but—

—Kristen stepped between them, shouting, "Leave her alone!" and —

—Freddy closed his fist around Kristen's shirt, lifted her from the floor and threw her into the air.

She tossed head over heels, arms and legs flailing and, before she could scream—

—Kristen landed in the flaming boiler. Her skin began to hiss immediately, glistening in the intense heat, then turning a charcoal black as it bubbled; her hair crackled as it burned, and her face felt as if it were melting from her skull as she looked out of the flames and screamed helplessly at Freddy as—

—he ripped open his shirt to reveal his mangled flesh beneath and the tortured faces of his young victims, their mouths yawning in silent screams, eyes bulging in pain, and Freddy shouted into the fire: "Now you're one of my chilll-drennn!" He spun around and faced Alice, who released a shrill scream when she saw the writhing faces beneath his shirt. He moved toward her and—

—Kristen clung to her last remaining thoughts as her body disintegrated rapidly. She was determined to keep Freddy from Alice and, calling upon her dream strength, extended a charred arm and shrieked as—

—a bolt of electric-blue energy shot from her fist and hit Freddy square in the back, making him dance like a marionette for a moment, but the damage was short-lived. Freddy arched his back and seemed to swell, to pulsate, as if feeding on the energy. Then, releasing an echoing laugh, he advanced on Alice, who backed away in paralyzed terror.

Her voice a dying gurgle, Kristen screamed, "Alice! You'll need my power!" and shot another bolt from the furnace aimed straight at Alice. It splashed against her chest in a flurry of sparks and—

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—Alice lost her breath for a moment, clenched her eyes shut and stiffened, feeling as if she were being electrocuted. The soothing blue energy coursed through her body like a revitalizing drug, and Alice opened her eyes as—

—Kristen's smoldering face took shape in Freddy's chest, emerging among the other faces of lost victims, her skin bubbling, mouth gaping...

Freddy was less than three feet away when he lifted his arm and swung the deadly blades through the air and—

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—Alice sat up in bed, screaming, clutching the sweat-soaked sheets. For a moment she could still feel the sizzling energy coursing through her body, and her throat was sore from breathing smoke. As

she regained her bearings, breasts heaving, she noticed something unfamiliar on her mirror across the room. A postcard was tucked beneath the mirror's frame. She got out of bed, crossed the room, plucked the card from the frame and gasped.

In the picture, Freddy grinned as he held a terrified Kristen in his arms. Alice read the words, written in blocky red letters, aloud:

"'Greetings from Hell... wish you were here...'"

The card began to blacken and shrivel and flames licked the paper in Alice's hand. She dropped it, gasping, and it disintegrated before it hit the floor.

Alice looked at the mass of pictures on her mirror and saw her eyes reflected in the small rectangular space left by the postcard. Her eyes were different, more intense somehow. They had changed...

Rick burst into the room and gasped, "Alice! You okay? I heard you —"

She faced him and cried, "We've gotta get to Kristen's house!"

***

They ran most of the way and saw the smoke half a block away. It billowed from Kristen's bedroom window.

Rick kicked in the living room's plate-glass window and tore aside the curtains. Alice followed him inside. As they started up the stairs they heard Mrs. Parker screaming in the hall. They found her standing in the smoky doorway of Kristen's room. Rick pulled her away and Alice stepped up to the door.

It was too late. The room was gone. Flames climbed the walls and poured across the ceiling.

All she could see of Kristen was a blackened arm that, in an instant, was swallowed by the fire...

Part Two: ALICE
Chapter Seven

Three days later, when Alice got home from the funeral, she went into the family room and fished through the row of videotapes in the cabinet until she found the one she wanted. She slipped it into the VCR, turned on the television, and watched as Kristen appeared on the screen, laughing, as Rick held her down on a patch of grass and tickled her.

"Stop! Stop!" Kristen shrieked.

The images and voices that followed—Kristen and Rick playing, Debbie razzing Sheila about studying so much, Sheila razzing Debbie about working out so much—made Alice feel better. Returning from the funeral, she'd been overwhelmed by a need to see Kristen, hear her... be close to her.

Alice heard Rick come into the family room but did not look up; she couldn't take her eyes from the screen, as if she were *drawn* to Kristen's image.

"Alice," Rick whispered, sitting beside her on the sofa, "what're you doing?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "I guess it... makes me feel better." She smiled at the screen. "You made her so happy then, Rick. Remember?"

"Yeah." He sighed heavily. "Why didn't I stay with her that night?"

"It wouldn't have made any difference."

"Sure it would've."

Alice faced him. "No, it *wouldn't* have. I saw it happen in my *dream,* Rick. There was this man, this *horrible* man, and—"

"Oh, *who?* Freddy?" He held up his hand. "Look, I've had *enough* of Freddy, okay? I heard it all from Kristen and I *don't* wanna *hear* any *more!* So just *stop* it." He turned away from her.

Alice didn't stop; she grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back around, saying urgently. "I could *smell* the *smoke,* Rick. I could feel the heat from the *fire!* I *watched* her *burn!"*

He covered his face with his hands and growled, "Stop it! Just... *stop!* Kristen wasn't crazy and neither are *you,* so why are you acting this way?" Pulling his hands away, Alice saw that he was about to cry. "Why, Alice?" he whispered.

"I... don't know, Rick. Really, I just feel so..." She tried to choose her words carefully. He was already beginning to think she might be losing it, and she didn't want that; she needed his help. "I feel so different. Something happened in the dream, I think. I can't think of anything but Kristen, which is normal, I guess... but this is *different*. I changed in my dream. She... *did* something to me. Now it's like part of her is with me all the time. *Inside* me. I think I even *look* different. Don't I? Don't you think so?"

He looked at her silently, shaking his head.

"Rick?"

He got up and left the room.

***

The next day, studying her reflection in the girls' restroom mirror, Alice was *certain* she had changed. Her face was more... defined, perhaps; her features seemed to stand out more and her eyes seemed brighter, in spite of the fact that she'd been up all night and felt tired enough to sleep standing up.

Someone had left a pack of Marlboros by the sink, and Alice shook one out, took matches from her purse and lit up, taking a puff. She burst into a fit of coughs and stared at the burning cigarette, sputtering, "I don't smoke!"

But Kristen did, she thought, dropping the cigarette in the sink.

"Kristen," she whispered, "what did you *do* to me?"

Sheila came in, stood at the faucet beside Alice, and splashed cold water on her face. "I am dead on my feet," she said exhaustedly as she dried off with a paper towel.

"We have matching luggage," Alice said, startling herself. They were Kristen's words.

"What?"

"You've been up all night?"

"That obvious, huh?"

Alice brightened with hope. "Then you saw him *too?"*

"Saw who? I didn't see anybody. I was up all night cramming for this physics test. And I was putting this little baby together." She opened her book bag and removed a gadget that looked like an electric shaver with a joy buzzer on the end. "You know how Debbie's afraid of bugs? I made this for her. Ultra-high sound waves. Makes 'em run, screaming their antennae off." She frowned at Alice and asked, "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah. Fine." She knew she didn't sound too convincing.

"Well, good luck on the test," Sheila said, gathering her things. "See you in class."

***

Once the physics test had begun, Mrs. Geary's classroom became silent as a tomb. It was the kind of silence that invited sleep, and Alice's vision blurred with exhaustion. Sheila was seated in front of her and already busy writing answers. Alice's eyes grew heavy and her head bowed as she began to doze, the room's silence and warmth easing her into a comfortable sleep, until—

***

—Sheila gasped and Alice snapped alert, leaning forward in her desk to see what was wrong.

Sheila was sitting stiffly, staring at her test paper with her pen poised to write as—

—the preprinted equations danced over the page like tiny acrobats, tumbling over one another, spinning and twirling...

The numbers stopped and letters were quickly scrawled on the paper with an invisible pen:

LEARNING IS FUN
WITH FREDDY

I'm asleep, Alice thought. *Gotta wake up... wake up... gotta—*

Alice heard something dripping and looked over Sheila's shoulder again to see that—

—blood was dripping from the point of Sheila's pen and splattering onto the paper.

"School's out," a familiar voice growled.

Alice looked to the front and saw Freddy seated at Mrs. Geary's desk, peeling an apple with one of the blades on his right hand. He grinned at Sheila, tossed the apple aside and stood.

"No!" Alice cried, turning to get out of her seat, but a rusty metal bar slammed into place across her lap, trapping her behind the small desk as Freddy walked toward Sheila. "No! Help! Somebody *help!"*

Alice looked around, but the other students were obliviously involved in their tests as—

—Freddy stood before Sheila, who was trembling like a kitten, and said, "All work and no play makes Sheila a *very* dull girl." He leaned forward, plucked her glasses off and flicked his tongue inches from her mouth, then asked, "Wanna suck *face?"*

Sheila screamed as Freddy grabbed her collar, pulled her out of her seat and pressed his mouth over hers, silencing her cry.

Alice shouted frantically for help but got no response while—

—Freddy's scarred cheeks pulled inward as he began to suck, and—

—Sheila's eyes widened impossibly and bulged from their sockets, threatening to pop out as veins began to stand out on her forehead and neck and—

—her face and hands began to shrivel and her struggles to weaken as her skull seemed to deflate with a soft moist sound and her rib cage, pressed hard against her shirt, imploded with a horrible thick *crrrack!*

"Somebody please... help," Alice said, but quietly this time, because she knew Sheila was lost. The girl's bulbous eyes dropped out of their sockets and dangled by bloody cords as her skin shriveled to a leathery husk and—

—Freddy slammed her down into her desk and laughed. "You *flunk."* Then he turned to Alice, reached out and stroked her cheek carefully with one of his blades as he whispered, almost lovingly, "Thank you," and—

***

—Freddy was suddenly gone and the classroom was alive with panic as Sheila lay across the top of her desk, clutching her breasts and gasping desperately for air.

Quickly, Alice got up, fumbled the inhalator from Sheila's book bag and tried to force it into Sheila's writhing mouth, but—

—Sheila's gasps stopped, her head dropped to the side and her body became limp on the desk.

The room was silent. Alice stood straight and looked around at the shocked students.

"Call an ambulance," somebody said as Debbie, Dan, and Rick gathered around Alice.

Alice spotted the bug-killing device Sheila had made for Debbie—it had fallen out of Sheila's book bag—and bent down and picked it up.

"Didn't you see him?" Alice asked tremulously. "He was here. He *did* this! I *saw* him!" Rick took her arm and gently coaxed her out of the room as Alice rambled on and on: "He did this... I watched it... I *saw* it..."

***

After all the students had been dismissed for the day, Rick, Alice, Debbie, and Dan stood in front of the school as the ambulance drove slowly out of the parking lot carrying Sheila's corpse. Rick tried unsuccessfully to calm Alice, but he no longer snapped at her like before. Instead, he found himself trying to ignore her talk about Freddy; it was no longer annoying... it was scary.

"Asthma attack my ass," Debbie mumbled, fighting tears. "What seventeen-year-old has a fatal asthma attack?"

"I *told* you," Alice insisted, "it was *Freddy."*

"Enough of that crap!" Debbie snapped.

"I saw it, I *told* you! It was my dream. I... I brought Sheila in..." She turned to Rick slowly, her face darkening with a horrible realization. "Oh, God, I brought her into my dream... like Kristen did with *me*. I *gave* her to Freddy! *And now she's dead!"* she hissed, backing away. Sobbing, she turned and ran away from them.

Rick's insides ached as he heard his sister cry.

"Rick," Dan said, "I think Kristen's story is getting to your sister."

In a flash of anger, Rick barked, *"Look,* Dan, I'm not so sure it's a *story* anymore, okay?"

"You mean... you *believe* it?"

"Well, look at us. We're dropping like *flies* around here." Rick looked at Debbie and could see in her eyes the same fear he felt. Then he turned and ran after Alice...

***

That night Alice sat down at her vanity and took from the mirror a picture of herself and Sheila, both laughing... happy...

Looking up at the mirror, she saw that still more of her reflection had been exposed by removing the picture. She touched her face in disbelief.

She looked prettier... stronger...

Chapter Eight

A few nights after Sheila's funeral, Dan entered the Crave Inn and saw Alice behind the register. He'd come to pick up his call-in order to take to the drive-in; Brenda McCarsky, captain of the cheerleader team, was waiting for him in his pickup. She could wait...

"Hey, Alice, how you doing?" he asked, and she smiled wearily. "Haven't seen you around lately."

"I've been working double shifts."

"Extra money, huh?"

"You know why, Dan. You just don't believe."

"No offense, Alice, really, it's just... kind of hard to swallow."

"The story is, but you can't argue with four deaths." Tears welled up in her eyes. "I don't know what to do. I can't stop it. Why doesn't he just *kill* me?"

On impulse, Dan reached over the counter and took her hand. "How long have you been awake?"

"Three days."

In spite of that fact, she looked well-rested and strong... very pretty, in fact, not as plain as before. Something about her was different.

"Don't you understand," she whispered, "every time I sleep, someone might die."

"All right, Alice, let's assume this whole thing is true. Why is Freddy all of a sudden after you?"

She chewed her lower lip a moment, then said, "Kristen was the last child left of the people who killed Freddy. Maybe Freddy can't get to new kids without someone like me. Someone to bring them to him. Like *me."*

The bell over the door clanged and Brenda stuck her head in and called, "Danny, we're gonna be late for the drive-in!"

He rolled his eyes. "Be right there." Alice got his order for him and, as he paid, Dan said, "Look, if there's anything I can do..."

"Thanks," she said, smiling.

Dan suddenly lost interest in his date with Brenda McCarsky, but he turned and left anyway.

***

The next day, as everyone else suited up for practice in the locker room, Rick went to a stall, locked the door, and sat on the toilet. He needed to be alone for a moment. The deaths had created a lot of tension—just moments before, Dan had nearly beaten up Buddy Milton for saying Alice was a "basket case'—but Rick had the added pressure of staying up every night with Alice. He didn't know how she managed to do it; he was ready to collapse.

He put his head in his hands, elbows on his knees, and relaxed.

Just for a minute or two, he thought.

But two minutes became five... and ten... and Rick began to doze as —

***

—Alice struggled to stay awake in Miss Kopitsky's history class. The aging woman lectured in her dry monotone voice, and Alice's head drooped forward heavily. Her eyes closed as she rested her head on her desktop.

Just for a little while, she thought. But when she was jarred from her rest—

***

—Alice realized she was in a darkened locker room facing a row of stalls. Half a dozen uniformed cheerleaders hurried into the room, waving their pom-poms and giggling... but Alice was *certain* it wasn't the girls' locker room. The cheerleaders went to the stall on the end and opened the door, crowding inside.

Moving forward, Alice peered into the stall and saw—

—Rick sitting on the toilet with a startled look on his face. She was relieved to see him, and pushed her way into the crowded stall. "Rick?" she said. "What's happening, Rick? Why are we—"

The stall door slammed shut and the entire stall rumbled and jerked like... like an *elevator*.

Soft syrupy Muzak began to play from overhead... an elevator-music version of "Taps."

They *were* in an elevator! The giggling cheerleaders seemed not to notice; they lavished Rick with kisses, fondling and stroking him, until—

—the elevator jerked to a halt and the door slid open. Alice moved toward Rick, but the cheerleaders headed out of the elevator, pushing her back with them.

"No!" she shouted, fighting them unsuccessfully. "No! Rick! *Rick!"*

Once she was outside the elevator, the door slid shut with an ominous rumble and she threw herself onto it, prying at it with her fingers, heaving and pulling until—

—the door slid open and Rick smiled at her, stepped toward her, but—

—the floor trembled, cracked and collapsed beneath him, its pieces falling silently down a black bottomless shaft as—

—Rick grabbed the railing on the wall and dangled over the pit, his legs kicking as he made small panicky sounds in his throat.

"Riiick!" Alice screamed, reaching for him.

"Going down," a voice said from above, and Kristen looked up to see Freddy grinning at them through the elevator's gridless vent. "Chain saws, lingerie, butcher knives... *infinity!"* Freddy threw back his head and laughed uproariously as—

—the railing began to glow a soft red and Rick's hands began to smoke. As the railing grew rapidly hotter, Rick's palms sizzled and gave off a sickly smell and he screamed, "Alice! Huh-help me! Help me, please, God, help *meeeee..."*

His hands let go and he disappeared into the blackness, his voice fading with him.

Alice screamed and looked up at Freddy, who waved to her with his knives.

"Thank you," he whispered again as—

***

—Alice awoke at her desk with a jolt, startling her classmates and Miss Kopitsky. When she realized what had just happened, Alice pounded the desk with her fist and screamed, *"Nooooo!"* She dashed from the room, ran down the hall and across campus to the gymnasium, then into the boys' locker room.

Coach Williamson ran toward her, shouting, "Hey, young lady, whatta you think you're—"

She dodged, ran around him and found the stalls, opening the one on the end.

Rick lay limp, sprawled facedown over the toilet.

Alice dropped to her knees and released a long, ragged scream...

Chapter Nine

Squinting in the glare of the sun, Alice stared at her brother's casket as the minister droned monotonously. A large crowd was gathered around the gravesite, mostly teenagers; sniffles and an occasional sob broke the cemetery's stillness.

Alice felt a disturbing numbness. She saw no end to the deaths, and her mind seemed to be blocking off any more tears or pain. She stared at the casket, stared... and stared... and... and—

***

—the lid swung open and Rick sat up, smiling. "This is great, huh?" he laughed. "They think I'm *dead!* I love it!" He got out of the casket and walked over to her, touching her cheek. "Hey, you know I wouldn't leave you all alone, Alice. This was just to fool ol' Freddy!"

A tear in her eye, Alice shook her head and whispered, "No... no more daydreams..."

***

"What are we going to do, Alice?"

Debbie's voice startled her from the daydream. The minister had finished and the crowd was breaking up. It seemed odd to see Debbie crying; she was so *tough*.

"We're going to stop daydreaming," Alice said, "and take that son of a bitch out."

"What! God, Alice, what're you talking about? I'm *sick* of this shit. Who's *next,* huh? Can you tell me that?"

Alice took her arm and led her away from the open grave. Dan followed them. *"You'll* be next if you don't get a grip on yourself. Understand? You're doing to have to do more than bench presses this time. We have to get *smart*. Smarter than Freddy. We're gonna *get him."*

Debbie seemed to calm down; she even seemed to be taking Alice seriously.

"Let me help," Dan said. "I'm not saying I don't believe you, but... well, maybe we should get help from someone else."

"Oh, sure," Debbie snapped, "let's trade death by Freddy for life in a rubber room."

"She's right," Alice agreed. "Other people—especially adults—won't see it."

"Well... it couldn't hurt," Dan tried again.

Debbie said, "Look, it'd be a waste of time. We should start thinking about how we're gonna kick Freddy's *ass."*

"That's right!" Alice exclaimed. "And remember—mind over matter." Alice heard her father calling for her and backed away from her friends. "Look, I'll see you guys later, okay?" She headed across the cemetery toward her father. He was already drunk.

***

Dan watched her go.

"'Mind over matter,'" Debbie said quietly. "Sheila said that to me once. I don't get it. Every day, it's like Alice is someone different."

"No," Dan whispered. "It's after every death."

"Do you really wanna tell someone, Dan? About Freddy, I mean?"

"Yeah. And I know just the guy..."

***

The next day Dan and Debbie went to see Mr. Bryson, their English literature teacher. Dan knew that Bryson taught a college night class in mythology and had a background in philosophy. Even better, he was a veteran of the sixties and, as Dan and Debbie stood in Bryson's office, Dan noticed a couple of Woodstock posters on the wall. They'd been talking with him for about ten minutes, asking questions about dreams, and now Bryson sat at his desk stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"Well," Bryson said, "every society, dating back to the ancients, has had theories regarding dreams—what they mean, how to control them."

"Control them?" Dan asked.

"Yes. Aristotle believed that during sleep your soul roams free. What it sees are dreams. Skilled dreamers control what they see."

"Where do the souls go?"

"There's supposed to be two gates your soul can enter, one a positive dream gate, the other a negative. The dream master guards the positive gate. Protects its sleeping host."

"Is there a guard for the negative gate?" Debbie asked.

"There were never any theories about that."

Dan hesitated a moment, then said, "What if we told you about a guy, a... a demon who lived in dreams and could kill you in your sleep?"

Bryson raised his eyebrows curiously. "Sounds a bit radical but, yes, it could fit the theory."

"Great," Dan said enthusiastically. "Because it's true. There is a guy—"

"His name's Freddy," Debbie added.

Bryson looked at them suspiciously. "Freddy?"

"Yeah," Dan said, becoming animated, "he lives in your dreams and *kills* you. Now... how do we stop him?"

Bryson stood, holding up his hands. "Whoa, whoa, slow down, wait a minute. Hey, Aristotle was writing *fiction,* okay? I mean, none of this is *real."*

Debbie glared at him, getting angry. "So what are you saying? That we're full of it?"

"No, not at all. Just... well, there have been a lot of deaths around here lately, and... I know how stress can get to you kids. Tell you what." He removed a business card from his pocket and offered it to Debbie. "This is a guy who raps to young people, really understands. Why don't you give him a try?"

Debbie slapped the card out of Bryson's hand and spat, *"Save* it. Save all your *bullshit!"* She turned to Dan. "Alice was right. Let's go."

Bryson followed them into the hall, calling, "No, wait! You should see this guy. Tell him about Freddy. And remember, you guys, just say *no."*

Alice was waiting for them at the foot of the hall stairs.

"Satisfied?" she asked.

"I knew it'd be a waste of time," Debbie grumbled.

Dan was disappointed; he shook his head and said, "I don't get it. He's from the *sixties*. I thought those people believed *anything*."

"Look," Alice said, "we have to keep thinking. Use our heads and stay sharp. Starting tonight, we sleep in shifts."

"Sooner or later, we're gonna conk out," Dan warned.

"No, we're *not,"* Alice snapped. "We're gonna get ready. For Freddy."

Debbie unclasped a wicked blank leather bracelet with silver studs from her wrist and handed it to Alice. "A bad-luck charm," she smirked. "Brings bad luck to the creep you flatten with it."

Alice smiled gratefully, then turned to Dan.

He felt like a failure; he'd been so sure Bryson would help. But when Alice took his hand, he knew it didn't matter. They would help each other.

***

That night Alice got Rick's nun-chucks and oriental-style bandanna from the garage and took them to her room, where she hung the bandanna beside the mirror above Sheila's bug-killing gadget. She put Debbie's studded bracelet on the vanity table, then spotted a picture of herself and Rick on the mirror. She pulled it off the glass, studied it a moment, then looked at her reflection in the mirror. She could see more of herself, and she had changed even more.

She thought she was quite attractive now... there was a new surety and strength in her eyes.

Alice took the nun-chucks to the middle of the room and tried some of the moves she'd seen Rick go through in the garage. She was slow and clumsy at first, but in mere minutes her arms began to move rapidly and the nun-chucks sliced the air with a whining hum, whipping around her, slapping from one hand to another, the chain clinking and clicking...

She stopped suddenly, realizing that what she'd just done was better than anything she'd ever seen Rick do... and he *practiced*.

Alice turned to her reflection again and whispered, "What's happening to me?"

Chapter Ten

Dan had been pacing in front of the Crave Inn for forty-five minutes, waiting for Alice. That afternoon they had agreed to meet there, but she had not shown up and the Crave Inn had already closed. He looked up and down the dark, deserted street as he walked to his truck. The small, friendly town his family had moved to only months ago now seemed sinister and threatening. He got into his truck and sat behind the wheel.

"All the towns in America," he muttered, *"I* had to move to the Bermuda Triangle." He folded his arms with a sigh and leaned his head against the back window. He felt sleepy...

***

Alice slammed her bedroom door, stomped to her bed and sat on the edge. She couldn't meet with Dan because her father wouldn't let her leave the house.

"I lost Rick because I didn't watch him," he'd slurred, standing in front of the door. "I don't wanna lose you. Honey... we're all we have..."

She laid back on her bed, her muscles aching from lack of sleep, and closed her eyes.

Just for a few minutes, she thought, relaxing until—

***

—she snapped awake, thinking, *Rick's bedroom window!*

She hurried down the hall to Rick's room, opened the window and crawled out, shimmying down the tree. Once on the ground, she headed down the street toward town.

In a few minutes she was standing in front of the Crave Inn, but Dan was nowhere to be found. She searched the intersecting streets for his truck but it wasn't there. A couple blocks down one of the streets, however, she saw—

—a movie theater. The marquee read: MIDNIGHT SHOW – REEFER MADNESS.

Not wanting to go home to her drunken father, Alice walked to the theater, paid admission at the box office, bought some popcorn and a Pepsi at the refreshment stand, and went into the auditorium and found a seat.

The black and white images on the screen cast a gray glow onto the blank faces in the audience as they stared at the movie, chewing their popcorn and Milk Duds.

On the screen a man was playing the piano and laughing maniacally as a man and woman looked on.

Alice watched, trying to get into the film as she ate her popcorn, when suddenly—

—the colorless picture changed to a filthy, rundown urban street. A howling wind blew crumpled newspapers down the sidewalk in front of a dilapidated building with a sign over the door that read, THE CRAVE INN. Alice's hand froze halfway to her mouth and she gaped at the screen. It was the diner in which she worked, but much older and in much worse shape... as if she were looking at the Crave Inn twenty or thirty years in the future.

A dry chill wind began to blow through the theater, as if the screen had opened up and the wind in the movie were blowing through the auditorium.

On screen the wind grew stronger, pounding the already battered diner, howling around the theater in a swirl until—

—Alice's carton of popcorn flew from her hand and scattered everywhere and her hair slapped her face as it was blown around, and then—

—the wind seemed to change direction, blowing back *into* the screen as it grew more forceful, until—

—the screen was sucking air *out* of the auditorium, like a gigantic vacuum cleaner. The suction was strong enough to slurp Alice's Pepsi out of its cup and into the screen, strong enough to rip the front-row seats from their bolts and down the black and white street in the film, and the wind grew stronger still, until—

—Alice screamed as she was sucked from her seat and through the air, straight into the screen, where—

—she tumbled painlessly onto the sidewalk.

Gasping for air, she stood up and looked around. Her surroundings were black and white, completely without color, just as they'd been in the movie. The wind continued to whip around her.

She opened the door beneath the Crave Inn's faded broken sign and walked into the diner, where color was immediately restored. Turning to close the door, she looked outside to see—

—the audience on the other side of the screen, oblivious to everything that had happened. They crunched popcorn and sucked soft drinks through straws, watching her intently. And seated in the fifth row, she saw *herself,* head slumped to one side as she slept.

"No," she whimpered. "Wake up... wake... *up!"*

The door slammed shut with a *bang;* Freddy stood behind it, grinning.

Alice screamed and stumbled backward, flopping into a counter seat, where the waitress droned, "What'll it be, sweety?"

It was her... *Alice*... fat and old, with gray hair, wrinkled pasty skin, and empty eyes. Alice stared at herself—her *future* self—in horror.

"Well, what'll it *be?"* the waitress asked impatiently. "I don't wanna be here forever, y'know."

"The usual," Freddy said, taking the seat beside Alice. He turned to her, and she could smell his foul breath as he said, "If the food don't kill ya, the service *will."*

The waitress slapped a large pizza onto the counter and shuffled away.

But it was no ordinary pizza.

What looked, at first, like meatballs, were actually marble-sized heads with vivid faces. They were the faces of Freddy's victims—Kincaid and Joey, Kristen, Sheila and Rick, and many others—all writhing in the melted cheese and screaming up at Alice in tiny insectlike voices.

"My favorite," Freddy hissed, lifting the pizza from the counter. "Cheese and carnage pizza!" He pointed a deadly blade at the pizza and began to chant, "Eenie-meenie-minie-*moe!"*

Alice screamed, *"Rick!"* when she saw that the blade pointed at a tiny version of her brother's head.

"Alice!" Rick cried. "Free us, Alice! *Freeeee uussss!"*

Freddy stabbed the blade into Rick's forehead and plucked him from the mass of melted cheese, holding the head up before him. "I *looove* soul food!" Then he popped the head into his mouth and bit down with a wet, sickening crunch, chewing enthusiastically.

"No!" Alice sobbed. "Nuh-nuh-*nooooo!"*

"Yessss," Freddy hissed, holding her face in his hands. "More, Alice. Bring me *more."* He spun around suddenly and the diner's door flew open again. Now, instead of the theater audience, there was a room on the other side.

It was a room Alice recognized; she'd been there before. It was Debbie's attic, filled with exercise equipment. Debbie lay on her weight bench; her arms dangled at her sides as she sighed wearily and closed her eyes.

Freddy leaned toward Alice's ear and whispered, "She's getting sleeepyyy."

"No," Alice whimpered, "please don't hurt her. No more... please stop."

Freddy sneered. "Your shift is *over!"*

He clanged his blades together and—

***

—Alice sat up in bed and looked around her darkened bedroom, cursing herself for falling asleep.

She hopped out of bed, praying that Dan was still waiting for her...

***

Dan snapped his head upright and looked around behind the wheel of his truck. "Fell asleep, I guess," he muttered. He spotted Alice hurrying around the corner in front of the Crave Inn and got out of the truck, sensing her urgency.

"C'mon!" she shouted. "We have to hurry! I'm driving!"

They got in the truck and Alice burnt rubber as they tore down the street.

***

Debbie jerked awake on her weight bench and grumbled about falling asleep. She'd been waiting for Alice and Dan, working out to pass the time and keep herself awake, but it hadn't worked. Taking a deep breath, she reached up and lifted the barbell with a heave, but—

—two horribly scarred hands closed over the barbell and pushed back down.

Debbie looked up to see a hideous man in a floppy hat, his face badly burned, his right hand in a glove of bloodstained knives.

She knew immediately that he was Freddy Krueger, and tried to push back the fear in her gut.

"I don't... believe... in you," she grunted, trying to resist him.

"That's okay," he laughed. "I believe in you."

He pushed down harder and harder until—

—her elbows snapped with a horrible crunch and bone cut through flesh, making her scream.

"No pain, no gain," he growled...

***

Driving like a lunatic, Alice exclaimed, "He's going after Debbie! I've gotta stop him!"

"You mean *we've* gotta stop him," Dan said. "I'm with you."

"You just feel sorry for me."

"Cut that shit out. Maybe before, but now I want to help you."

"Here we are," Alice said, turning into Debbie's driveway...

***

As Debbie forced herself to her feet, her broken arms dangled at her side uselessly, until—

—her forearms broke off and thunked to the floor.

Black insectlike claws slid from the stumps of her arms and burst from her shoulders, growing longer and longer, until—

—she realized what they were: cockroach legs. Black and crusty and spiny and—

—Debbie screamed, *"Give me back my bodyyyy!"*

***

Dan jerked awake in his truck and spotted Alice running round the corner in front of the Crave Inn. Confused, he got out of the truck as Alice shouted, "We have to hurry! I'm driving!" She got in the truck and they screeched away from the curb...

***

Debbie's body was literally falling apart. Pieces were dropping off, skin was peeling and flaking to reveal the insectile body beneath. She staggered across the attic toward a small door that seemed to grow larger and larger as she neared it, with roach legs ripping through her workout suit, tearing her skin and replacing her legs and joints. She threw herself through the door, but—

—her feet stuck to the floor and she fell forward. The floor was made of a thick goo... like the world's strongest glue...

Her face plopped into the substance, cutting off her breath, and she pulled her head back, fighting the sticky substance, until—

—the skin peeled from her face and she sensed the antennae that popped up from her head when she lost her skin, twitching this way and that as she looked around. She didn't want to see her face now... never again...

***

"He's going after Debbie," Alice said as she squealed around corners. "I've gotta stop him."

"You mean, *we've* gotta stop—" Dan stopped, looked around, blinked several times. "Wait a second. I get the weirdest feeling we've been through this before."

Alice threw him a puzzled, confused look, then it began to dawn on her. "Oh, my God. We're asleep. He's got us going in circles!" She stepped on the accelerator. "We've gotta keep going!"

***

A few feet away from her, Debbie saw another roach struggling in the sticky substance and she tried to scream, but—

—it came out as a clicking, insectlike sound.

Fighting the hold of the goo, she turned toward the door, spotting other roaches trapped in the thick slime. The door had become huge, now, almost like a *garage* door. She struggled toward it... fighting... pulling herself along, until—

—an enormous, godlike eye appeared in the doorway.

Debbie inched forward, looked over the edge to the outside and saw that—

—she was inside a tiny box held in Freddy's hand.

"Welcome to the Roach Hotel!" he laughed. "You can check in... but you *can't* check *out!"*

The walls began to crumble in around her, closing in faster and faster, until—

—there was only blackness...

***

Dan watched Alice as she maneuvered his truck through a suburban labyrinth and suddenly—

—she stiffened and her head jerked back with a horrible shudder as she cried out.

"What was *that?"* Dan asked.

"Debbie," she said, barely a whisper. "She's gone. I've... *collected* her... like the others." Her eyes widened and Dan looked out the front window to see—

—Freddy, standing in the middle of the road. He *knew* it was Freddy even though Dan had never seen him before—it *had* to be—and Dan shouted as—

—Alice slammed her foot to the floor, shouting, "Okay, asleep or awake, I'm gonna punch his fuckin' ticket!" and the truck plunged forward and Freddy grinned and waved at them, growing larger and larger in the windshield, until—

—the truck slammed into him, and—

—there was the teeth-grinding sound of crunching metal, and then—

—nothing...

***

Alice was jarred from sleep by the impact and immediately pried open the truck's mangled door.

Dan lay still, embracing the dashboard, his head pressed against the shattered steering wheel. The front end of the truck was hugging the fat trunk of a tree.

"Oh, Guh-God," Alice stammered. "Sleepwalking... we were *sleepwalking*... that son of a *bitch*... he made us drive in our *sleep!* Oh, Dan, I'm sorry... God, I'm *so sorry!"* She looked around to see that there was a car parked across the street and an elderly couple was watching them.

The man crossed the street, saying, "An ambulance is coming."

The ambulance arrived minutes later, and after bandaging Dan's leg with gauze, they put him, moaning in pain, on a stretcher and lifted him inside. Alice got in, too, and knelt beside him. As the ambulance drove away siren wailing, one of the paramedics—a chubby, cocky man who seemed oblivious to the urgency of the situation—began filling a syringe with a clear fluid, checking it for air bubbles.

"What's that do?" Alice asked.

"Relaxes your boyfriend," the paramedic replied, preparing to inject the needle into Dan's arm.

Alice slapped the syringe from the paramedic's hand, crying, "No! He stays awake!"

"Hey," the paramedic slurred sarcastically, picking up the syringe, "orders is orders."

"He's allergic, okay?"

"Well, you shoulda said something in the first place. Damned kids."

Alice leaned close and stroked Dan's cheek. "Don't let them put you to sleep."

Chapter Eleven

Later, in the emergency room, Alice stood across the room and watched as a nurse and an intern tried to inject Dan with a sedative. He was weak but managed to make their task difficult.

The doctor, Dan's parents, and Alice's father burst in suddenly.

"When're you going to operate?" Alice asked the doctor tremulously.

"Well, from the looks of him, probably in about fifteen minutes."

"Oh, God," Alice whispered, looking at the clock on the wall: a quarter to ten. After one more look at Dan, she turned to hurry from the room, but her father grabbed her arm, his car keys dangling from this thumb, and held her back.

"Alice," he slurred, "they'll help him."

"They're gonna kill him," she hissed, then snatched the keys from him and dashed toward the door.

"Alice, *dammit,* come back here!"

She ignored him and hurried out the exit, running across the parking lot to his car.

By the time she was on the road, driving *well* over the speed limit, the dashboard clock read 9:49. She had eleven minutes to save Dan, who, at that moment—

***

—was being wheeled down a corridor on a gurney. He struggled inwardly to fight the slowly-growing effects of the shot he'd received a few minutes before, but the fluorescent lights were growing fuzzier by the moment as they passed slowly and monotonously overhead. He prayed Alice would be able to do something as—

***

—she screeched to a halt in front of her house, raced from the car to the front door and let herself in, then hurried to the bathroom. Taking a bottle of her father's sleeping pills from the medicine

cabinet, she poured several into her palm, said, "That oughtta be enough for a trip on the Freddy express," and chewed them up, then hurried to her room. Standing before her vanity, she swept several of the pictures off the mirror so she could *really* see herself, then strapped on Debbie's studded bracelet, tucked Sheila's bug-killing gadget under her belt, and lastly, tied Rick's oriental bandanna around her forearm. Studying her reflection, she said firmly, "This ends. *Now."*

Then she sat down at the vanity, feeling the first effects of the sleeping pills as—

***

—Dan was lifted onto the operating table, the room being prepared quickly, with nurses checking instruments and doctors scrubbing up. The anesthesiologist appeared beside Dan and smiled down at him, lowering the gas mask slowly over Dan's face. "Just count backward from a hundred," the man said.

"No," Dan breathed. "I'll... take the pain... please... I have to... stay awake... please..."

But the mask covered his face and muffled his words as—

***

—Alice gasped and lifted her head from the vanity table to stare wide-eyed at her own reflection. She stood quickly, amazed by what she saw. It was herself, all right, but she'd changed...

She saw in the mirror a turbocharged image of herself... leaner and tighter... her jeans clung to her thighs, and her shirt was tied halter-like just above her waist. The bracelet had spikes where there once were rounded studs, and the gadget beneath her belt now glowed, as if emitting a powerful energy...

"Fuckin' A," she whispered as—

***

—Dan opened his eyes on the operating table and looked up to see a surgical-masked doctor bending over him. But the eyes above the light green mask...

... the eyes were Freddy's...

"Krueger!" Dan shouted.

"Well, it ain't Dr. Seuss," Freddy said with an evil laugh.

Dan screamed, "Alice! *Aaaaallll*—

***

—llliiiiice!"

The mirror shimmered like a pool, and Alice saw Freddy standing beside Dan, who lay helpless on the table.

She took three steps back from the vanity, screamed, "Get away from him, you son of a *bitch!"* and ran forward, leaving the floor and shattering the mirror with a dead-on kick as she—

—passed through the mirror and rolled over the operating room floor. Once she was on her feet, Freddy was gone. She went to the operating table and took Dan's hand. "C'mon," she said urgently, "we're dreaming. You can get up now."

He gaped at her as he stood, saying, "Alice, you look *great."*

"Save it for later. C'mon, we've gotta get out of here."

She led him to the swinging doors, pushed through, and—

—they found themselves in a long dark tunnel with squiggly, wormlike neon lights on the curved walls. It was a funhouse tunnel, the kind that turned slowly as you walked through it. Alice felt Dan squeeze her hand as they started down the tunnel, walking cautiously, until—

—Freddy appeared at the other end. He laughed and growled, "Out for a lover's stroll?" Then he leaned forward, gripped the edge of the tunnel and turned it until it was spinning wildly, tossing Alice and Dan head over heels.

They fought it, turning to crawl back toward the other end where—

—the operating-room door had been replaced by a round stained-glass window which grew larger as they drew nearer, until—

—they crashed through the stained glass and tumbled to the floor of an enormous, drafty church. Alice rolled over and knelt beside Dan, who looked dazed, weakened. She heard a sound... a disturbing sound...

Beeping. The beeping of the operating-room heart monitor.

"Alice?" Dan croaked as he began to fade, becoming more and more transparent.

"Dan!" she cried. "No! You can't!"

"It's too late, Alice... too late..." He grew dimmer and dimmer, until —

***

—he opened his eyes on the operating table and stared blearily at the faces of doctors and nurses.

"No!" he shouted. "Put me back under! I've gotta go back!"

"Relax, son," the doctor said soothingly. "It was rough, but we pulled you through."

"No... no," Dan groaned as—

***

—Alice stood and looked around the church cautiously. Soft voices began to sing from above, and Alice looked up to see several pale children—the emaciated children with bloated stomachs from the paintings in Freddy's living room—standing in the choir loft, singing, "One, two... Freddy's coming for you... three, four... better lock your door..."

A loud creak from behind made her turn as the fifteen-foot-tall double doors swung open to reveal Freddy standing in the doorway. He clanked his blades together and his voice echoed through the church as he called, "Welcome to *Wonderland,* Alice!"

Alice smiled, feeling her strength, her energy, and shouted, "I'm gonna send your guts back to *Hellll!"* Bracing herself, she ran down the center aisle of the church and flew into a cartwheel, aiming herself straight at Krueger, until—

—her feet landed square in the middle of his chest, sending him backward. But he only laughed.

She spun like a top, kicking with each turn, smacking her heel into Freddy's chin again and again and *again,* but—

—Freddy only threw back his head and roared with laughter, enjoying the fight. He moved forward suddenly, wrapped an arm around her neck and whispered in her ear, "You think you've got what it takes? I've been guarding my gate a *loooonnggg* time, bitch." Sweeping her up in his arms, he threw her across the church and—

—Alice slammed into the confessional, shattering it into jagged chunks of wood as Freddy shouted, "You have their power, but *I* have their *souls!"* Unharmed, she lay still a few moments, playing possum as she listened to Freddy's footsteps crunch through the rubble toward her until he was close enough, then—

—she jumped to her feet, swung her fist through the wall where the confessional had been and closed her fingers around a fat electrical cable, ripping it out of the hole until it snapped in two with a shower of sparks. She snatched the gadget Sheila had made from beneath her belt and slammed the crackling end of the cable into the center of the device, and—

—a glowing blue bolt of electricity shot from it, leaping across the gap between Alice and Freddy and blasting him in the chest.

Freddy released a gut-wrenching scream then stood still a moment, looking down at his chest with amazement.

Alice had blown a hole in the child killer. She could see straight through his chest to the pews behind him. She could even see his heart beating.

Maggots squirmed from the thumping organ and glistening black roaches skittered around the gory edge of the hole.

Alice tossed her weapons aside and smiled, until—

—Freddy laughed and passed a hand over the hole in his chest casually. It disappeared; he was whole again. He grinned, moving toward her ominously. "I... am... *eternal,"* he said, smacking her across the face, then grabbing her, lifting her over his head, and throwing her into the altar.

She landed with a crash and looked up to see him advancing on her. She knew it was for the last time. His blades were poised, ready to cut...

The children in the choir loft began to chant:

"Now I lay me down to sleep... the master of dreams my soul to keep... for in the reflections of my mind's eye..."

The remaining words suddenly came to Alice as if she'd known them all along, and she recited them with the children, at the same time sweeping a shiny, reflective shard of stained glass from the littered floor: "... let evil see itself... *and it shall DIIIEEE!"* She held up the mirrorlike glass and it shined on Freddy's face as he gazed at his own reflection and—

—he staggered backward, his mouth yawning open to scream. But the voice that screamed was not his; it was the combined voices of his young, innocent victims crying out in relief. He stumbled back against the wall as—

—his red and green striped shirt began to pulse as something beneath it moved... small young arms... reaching out of Freddy's chest and stomach... clawing at the shirt's material until—

—they tore through and the hands of Freddy's victims reached up toward his face, one clutching his jaw and pulling down hard while another dug its fingers into his eyes and another closed on his throat while another squeezed his neck and another his scarred cheek and—

—Freddy's scream became his *own,* and his tortured voice bounced through the church relentlessly as his mouth was pulled open farther and farther, until—

—thick dark blood sprayed from his eye sockets and the horribly burned skin of his face peeled away like rind and—

—his jaw tore away with a wet crunch, and a shimmering multicolored stream of light rose from his split skull. The tiny voices of happy children sang from the light, and Alice watched it rise toward the shattered window above as the voices called, "Thank you... thank you, Alice... goodbye... good-byyyeee..."

Freddy imploded and fell to the floor an empty shell.

The church was silent.

The children were gone.

Alice was alone. She walked slowly toward Freddy's remains, looked down at them a moment, then hissed, "Rest in *Hell.*"

She slammed the huge doors of the church as she left...

Chapter Twelve

Weeks later, when Dan was finally able to get out, they went for a long walk through Springwood Park, hand in hand. Both were bruised and cut, but the injuries *inside* would take much longer to heal than those on the outside.

"I slept through all of last night," Dan said happily. "And I had no *guests* in my dreams."

"I'm still having trouble," Alice admitted. "I manage two, maybe three hours a night. I don't mind, though. Now I have more reasons to enjoy staying awake." She kissed him gently as they stopped beside a large fountain. Water sprayed into the air and cascaded into the round pool below. Dan fished in his pocket for some change. "Oh, c'mon," Alice laughed, "you don't believe in that stuff, do you?"

"Yeah, I do. And... I think you do too. Now, make a wish."

He tossed the coin in, and Alice watched the water ripple in response. As the pool's surface shimmered, Alice thought she saw, for just an instant—

—Freddy's reflection, as if he were standing across the fountain, grinning at them.

It was gone in the blink of an eye.

"What did you wish for?" Dan asked, smiling.

She stared at the water a moment longer as gooseflesh crawled over her neck and back. Freddy was gone. Standing, she said, "If I tell you, then it won't come true."

Holding hands, they walked away from the fountain together...

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET:
PART 5
The Dream Child

Chapter One

They were making love in Dan's bedroom and Alice was reaching her peak, dragging her nails over Dan's back hard enough to leave thin red tracks. She cried out and arched her back as Dan's movements became more intense, and he breathed her name into her ear before he, too, cried out and they clutched one another desperately, kissing as if it were their last moment together.

When they were finished, after several long minutes of stroking and kissing one another lovingly, Alice whispered, "I'm gonna take a shower."

Dan smiled at her sleepily and rolled aside so she could get out of bed and go into the bathroom.

At first, when she and Dan had started dating last year, Alice had thought, with resignation, that it would only be temporary, until someone prettier and more interesting came along and captured Dan's attention. But as their relationship went on, Alice found that *she* was becoming prettier and more interesting!

She turned on the shower, waited for the water to get hot, then stepped into the billowing steam and began to soap up, lifting her face to the jets of hot water.

Last year, after the deaths of her brother and friends, Alice had thought nothing good would ever happen to her again. But that had changed. Not only was she ecstatically happy with Dan, but her father had stopped drinking and started going to Alcoholics Anonymous. With graduation less than twelve hours away, Alice was happy. She scrubbed her hair, working up a lather as a gurgling sound cut through the hiss of the shower.

Alice stopped, frowned and listened. The sound was coming from below. She looked down to see—

—the water in the tub swirling frantically over the drain, being sucked loudly through the tiny round holes.

She stepped back from the drain, frowning. The drain was sucking the water into an unnaturally violent whirlpool. The pull was so

strong that Alice could feel her feet slipping over the bottom of the tub toward the drain... slipping... slipping... until—

—her legs flew out from under her and she landed on her ass, sliding down the tub toward the drain, fighting the tremendous pull, her arms flailing as—

—she was sucked down into an oppressive blackness through which she plummeted helplessly until—

—she landed in a naked heap on a cold floor. She huddled into a crouched position, hugging herself to hide her nakedness in the dim light as she listened to the sound of loud babbling voices. She turned slowly, fearfully, and looked down a long narrow room with plain metal-framed beds lined against the walls on either side. There were mattresses on the floor, some of them ripped to shreds. There were men moving in the shadows, some on the beds, others walking or crawling on the cold dirty floor. They wore what appeared to be pajamas that had once been white; now they were darkened by brown and yellow stains, and grimy lumps clung to the material. The men looked filthy, their hair scraggly and shiny with grease. Some of them masturbated in dark corners, grunting wetly as their eyes rolled in their heads; others laughed as they picked at their clothes and scrubbed their faces again and again. Some of the men paced frantically, murmuring to themselves as if their lives were about to end.

None of them noticed her.

Not yet, anyway, she thought with a sudden jolt of fear. A sound made her turn around to face a steep metal staircase that led to a thick lead door. Two men with name tags on their white institutional uniforms stood in the doorway, backlit by a glaring white light.

"How many you think there are?" one asked.

"I'd make it one hundred," the other said.

Their voices echoed in the cavernous room.

Alice took a breath to shout at them for help, but she realized suddenly that she was wearing clothes. She stood slowly and looked down at herself. She was wearing a nurse's uniform with a name tag over her left breast; it read AMANDA KRUEGER. Before she could react to the change, one of the orderlies shouted from above:

"Merry Christmas, lunatics!" He slammed the lead door with a thunderous clang. Heavy bolts slammed into place.

Alice screamed, "No! Wait!"

She was startled by the sudden silence behind her, and turned to see the men facing her. Some of them smiled, others laughed, and a few just grunted, drooling as they reached out for her, staggering forward.

Terrified, Alice stumbled backward and turned, but—

—there were more of them; they came from every direction. She screamed as a voice rose from the group:

"Me first! I'm first! Lemme through!"

A thin, hunched man pushed his way through the crowd, cackling as he grinned at her with wet lips. Alice dropped to her knees, fists clenched, screaming, because—

—the man pressing toward her looked so familiar. His skin was smooth and he had hair... he had not been burned, but his eyes, his nose, his mouth... even his voice... she had seen him before...

... he looked like Freddy Krueger.

The wiry man slobbered as he reached out, grabbed her hair and—

—Alice screamed, opening her eyes and looking down to see—

—Dan. She lay on top of him and he stared up at her, shocked. Alice gave a sigh, relieved that her nightmare was over, and reached out to stroke Dan's cheek. He smiled, but—

—his smile became a sinister grin and he moved quickly, violently, rolling Alice onto her back, and she cried out, startled, looking up as —

—the slobbering man grinned down at her, clutching her shoulders as he worked his way between her legs, grunting, "You love it, Alice! Don't you? Alice? *Alice?"*

"Nooo!" she screamed, as—

—Dan shook her, shouting, "Alice? *Alice?"*

She stopped and gaped at him with wide eyes.

"It's okay, sweetheart," he whispered. "It's only me."

As her heart pounded in her chest, she muttered, "Oh... guess I was having... a nightmare..."

Dan kissed her forehead and whispered, "It's okay now. It's okay..."

Chapter Two

"And so, my fellow graduates," Dan said with mock solemnity, standing on the edge of the fountain in front of Springwood High shortly after the graduation ceremonies, "let me remind you that the world is your oyster."

Mark sat on the grass sweeping his pencil over his sketchpad, stopping to push his thick horn-rimmed glasses up on his nose as a few other graduates—including Alice—stood around, watching Dan with amused chuckles as parents and other students filed out of the gymnasium. Mark was drawing a comic-book illustration of Dan, glancing up at him now and then as his hand moved quickly. He'd shed his cap and gown and wore a Judge Dredd T-shirt and blue jeans.

"The sky is the limit!" Dan went on. "Nothing succeeds like success! And if you think the glass is half empty... then piss in it until it's *full!* I thank you." Dan bowed to the smattering of applause that rose up from his scattered audience, then he threw his cap into the air hard, and it came down—

—onto Mark, who dropped his sketchpad to lean forward and catch it. As he sat up again, Mark saw that Greta had picked up his pad and was standing a few feet away, paging through it. His face flushed; there were several pictures of *her* in there.

Greta was an eye-popper. She was fair-skinned with cascading blond hair and a body that was fashion-model thin. In fact, she planned to become a model. But that was part of her problem; she was ultrathin and tried too hard to stay that way. It would be unfair to say Greta ate like a bird; when Mark was a little kid, he'd had a canary that ate more in six months than he'd seen Greta eat during their entire senior year. Even so, Greta was beautiful and Mark adored her—but he didn't want *her* to know that, so he lunged for the sketchpad. It was too late.

Greta looked at him and smiled gently. "Can I have one of these?" she asked, holding up a picture of herself.

Mark shriveled with embarrassment.

"Come on, a graduation present to your *inspiration?* Who, by the way, would've charged you seventeen-fifty an hour if she'd known she was modeling for your drawings." She smiled, but—

—Mark dropped Dan's graduation cap, snatched the book away from her and swept it behind his back. Then, after a moment, he opened it, drew a straight line, tore out the page and handed it to her, saying, "That's a profile."

She looked at it and scowled. "Come *on,* Mark, if I'm going to stand a chance modeling in New York, I've *got* to be thin."

Standing, Mark said with smiling concern, "But at the rate you're going, Greta, you'll waste away before you make the cover of *Vogue* and marry the rock star of your choice."

Greta stuck her nose in the air, feigning annoyance. "Rock stars were *so* mid-eighties."

Yvonne and Alice approached them, and Yvonne said, "I believe the current trend is more toward international corporate bankers."

Yvonne was tall, black, and very attractive, although in a more mature way than Greta. She was a student at the university, working as a nurse's aid as she finished her nursing education. She held up a key on a large metal ring.

"This," she said, "is the key to the university pool, which officially closes at six o'clock."

"Would that mean that our party officially starts at seven?" Mark asked.

"That's the opinion of those in the know," Alice said with a conspiratorial smile. She looked tired but still pretty. Just a year ago she'd been so plain, so unnoticeable. Mark supposed that losing as many loved ones as Alice had would tend to make one grow up fast.

"Yo, super jock!" Yvonne shouted, waving the key at Dan. "Seven o'clock!"

Dan smiled and headed for them as his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jordan, came out of the gymnasium and crossed the grass.

"Careful climbing around on that fountain, Dan," Mr. Jordan said. "We can't have State's star running back breaking his leg the day he graduates from high school." He slapped his son on the back. "You

know, being on a campus like this, I was thinking about my last game, senior year."

Mark saw Dan and Mrs. Jordan exchange a knowing here-we-go-again look.

"We were playing the Magnolia Rangers," Mr. Jordan went on. "Fourth quarter, ten seconds left. The Rangers have the ball... and old Tom Peters lets fly with this bullet pass, and... well, sir, *I* intercept it..."

In unison, Dan and Mrs. Jordan chimed, "... and run it back eighty yards for the winning touchdown."

Mr. Jordan blinked and smiled good naturedly. "Have I told you that one?"

"Three times," Dan said warmly. "This *week*. You're senile, Dad. Your memory's going. We're putting you in a home."

Mr. Jordan tapped the side of his head and said, "Budweiser's disease."

Mark stepped away from the Jordans and turned to Yvonne and Alice, saying, "About that party... you've got the pool key, but how are we gonna get past 'Officer' Beland, ace security guard?"

Yvonne grinned. "Be in the bushes behind the employee parking lot at five to seven, and bring your towel." Noticing that Alice was watching Dan, Yvonne said, "Why don't you go over and help Dan flex his muscles."

Mark noticed Greta walking back toward the gymnasium looking at the paper he'd given her after drawing a straight line on it; he had second thoughts and started after her. "Hey, Greta!" he called. When she stopped and turned, he asked, "Were you serious? Would you really like one of the pictures?"

She smiled. *"Yes!* I thought they were very good."

He opened the sketchpad and tore one out, handing it to her, not without embarrassment.

She looked at the drawing proudly, smiled, whispered, "Thank you," and leaned forward to give him a quick kiss on the mouth.

Marks' chest swelled and he grinned as he watched her walk away, admiring the picture he'd drawn...

***

"Hello," Alice said to Dan's parents. Mrs. Jordan gave her that worried look that seemed to be typical of all mothers who realize they're losing their boy to another woman.

"Congratulations," Mr. Jordan said warmly. "You looked *so* nice today."

"Thank you."

Mrs. Jordan lifted her eyebrows and said, "We didn't get a chance to say hello to your father. He left so quickly."

"Yes, I guess he had... some business." Alice didn't know *why* her father had left so quickly; she wished he'd stuck around.

"Won't it be nice never to walk those hallowed halls again?" Dan laughed, waving toward the school. "One month from now we'll be in Paris, and high school will just be a memory. A bad dream."

Alice smiled and tingled at the very thought of their coming trip to Europe.

"Dan," Mr. Jordan said, "you've got a full athletic scholarship to State College. Pro scouts are already sniffing around. You'd better come home from Europe ready to run."

"Didn't I tell you?" Dan said jovially. "We've already decided to defect to Bulgaria. We're never coming home."

Mrs. Jordan turned to Alice and asked sternly, "Alice, how does *your* father feel about this trip to Europe?"

As if sensing trouble, Mr. Jordan took her arm and led her away, winking at Dan and Alice as he said, "Honey, did I ever tell you about the time we were playing the Magnolia Rangers...?"

Dan turned to Alice, studied her face a moment and said, "Something—I mean, something besides my *mother*—is bothering you."

"My dream," she whispered.

"You never talked about it. It wasn't... *him,* was it?"

"Not exactly. But this was the first time since... well, since last year... that I wasn't in control."

"You want to tell me about it?" he asked, stroking her cheek.

She smiled and nodded. On their way home she shared her dream with Dan...

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As Dan parked his truck outside Alice's house, he said, "It could just be a dream. I mean, a *regular* dream."

"If anyone knows what's a regular dream and what's something more, I'd guess it's me, wouldn't you?" He nodded and they were quiet for a moment as she stared out the window. With determination, she shook her head, unwilling to let the dream get to her. Too many good things were happening. "To hell with him!" she snapped, turning to Dan. "I was his only doorway, and I'm *not* letting him back in!" She leaned over, kissed Dan and said, "I hear Switzerland has two hundred and seventy-five kinds of chocolate. I plan to eat one of each."

"What time do you want to go to the party?" Dan asked.

"I can't. I'm working."

"But I thought you and Yvonne were in on this together. The plan to get past Mad Dog Beland, dread campus guard—"

"Don't worry, we've got it covered."

"Then you *have* to go to the—"

She cut him off: "Those Swiss chocolates cost money, y'know." She kissed him again, then got out of the truck. When she was halfway to the door, Dan called her name. She turned to see him smiling bashfully at her; he looked away, then at her again.

"Well... you know," he said.

"I love you too," she called.

In the house, Alice's father asked, "Where have you been?"

"With Dan."

On his way out of the living room, he said, "Well, get in the kitchen and fix dinner."

His words caused her pain. She started for the kitchen, murmuring sarcastically, "Congratu-*lations,* darling... this must be the happiest day of your *life,* darling... you looked *lovely,* darling... I was so proud of my little—"

She stopped dead in her tracks as she entered the kitchen.

The room was filled with flowers. Roses, carnations, daisies, lilies, and orchids filled the kitchen with their sweet fragrance. A smile grew slowly on Alice's face; she was unable to hold back the tears that stung her eyes. She spun around to see her father standing in the doorway. His face still held its gruff, emotionless expression, but he stepped forward and touched her face.

"You looked so pretty up there today," he whispered.

She threw herself at him, squeezing him tightly. "I didn't see you afterwards."

"I left because I didn't want to... you know... embarrass you. Your father, the *drunk."*

"The *alcoholic!"* she snapped. "There's a big difference. Unless you stop going to your meetings."

He smiled wearily. "Clean and sober and... *boring*. That's your old man."

She smiled at him for a moment, then noticed the kitchen clock: twelve before seven. "I've gotta change for work," she said. "Anne will have a fit if I'm late." She turned to leave, then stopped, turned back and smiled lovingly. "I love my flowers, Daddy."

He looked away, embarrassed.

Chapter Three

Forty-five minutes after Richard Beland got off his motorcycle and began his shift as security guard, the telephone at his station rang and he unlocked the metal box in which it was housed. "Telephone Station Seven," he answered.

"Is this Officer Beland?" a female voice asked.

"It is."

"This is Lieutenant Clemmens with the state police. Why the *hell* are you answering this phone?" she snapped.

"I-I-I'm afraid I don't understand," the little overweight man said.

"I guess *not*. Why aren't you out on I-45? Isn't your relief man there yet?"

"No, ma'am."

"You never received my ten-thirteen?"

"An *assist-officer* call? *No,* ma'am!" Beland had been outgrowing his uniform for some time, but it wasn't until that moment that he really noticed its snugness around his jutting belly.

"Do I have to do *everything* myself around here?" the woman shouted. "Let me go through it again..."

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Alice dressed for work as she spoke into her speaker phone in a firm, angry voice: "There's a near *riot* out on the Interstate! Kids from *your* university. You're being asked to assist the state police because of your experience in dealing with students. Your relief man was supposed to be there at oh... um, 1800 hours. We can't afford to wait any *longer!* Now. I'm going to personally give you directions to the riot site... ready?"

***

Thrilled by the prospect of helping the state police, Beland fumbled the pad and pencil out of his pockets and wrote down the directions in scribbles, saying, "But that's a two and a half hour dri—

uh, I mean, I'll get right on it. Fast as I can, ma'am." He hung up the phone and hurried to his motorcycle in the parking lot as—

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—Dan, Mark, Yvonne, and Greta watched him waddle across the parking lot, stifling their laughs.

"Hang onto that girl, Dan," Yvonne whispered. "She knows how to make a *hell* of a phone call. Okay, guys, we've got until midnight." Gathering their things together, they headed toward the pool...

***

Dusk began to fall as Alice walked to work. She was hurrying along the sidewalk, not wanting to be late, when—

—she heard a sound... a *singsong* sound... like chanting softly...

She slowed her pace as she began to pass through Springwood Park to go into town, and looked through the fence to the children playing in the park... they were jumping rope... sitting in the mounds of sand between the swing set and the monkey bars... very familiar children...

Their skin was ghostly white, their eyes dark and stomachs bloated, and they were chanting, "One, two... Freddy's coming for you... three, four, better lock the door..."

As they counted on and on, Alice stopped and watched them, whispering to herself, "This should *not* be happening..."

She hurried by them, trying desperately to ignore them and their ominous chanting, heading toward the open green in the middle of the park, when she noticed that the children had added a new couplet to the rhyme: "Nine, ten... he's coming back again..."

She spun toward them, but they were gone. Turning back again to head for work, she saw that—

—where there had been nothing a moment ago, there now stood an imposing Gothic-style building with stone walls and towers. She somehow knew—although she had no idea *how* she knew—that it was a Catholic hospital... a sort of *convent,* too, because nuns in

sparkling white habits walked in and out of doorways and scurried across the green grass surrounding the sinister building.

I'm awake, Alice thought. *I'm not dreaming... why is this happening?*

Unable to resist her curiosity, she moved toward the building and walked through the enormous entrance... into a dark, musty corridor... past an empty nurse's station... past endless open doors that led into utter darkness... and there was a smell... sweet and sickly and disturbing...

As she rounded a corner, Alice caught a glimpse of a white gown disappearing through a doorway with a quiet rustle. She chased the nun, hoping for an explanation...

Hurrying into the room after her, Alice saw a metal spiral staircase going up into the misty darkness. Looking around, she could not see the nun, so she started up the staircase. A dozen steps up the staircase there was a clang and—

—the step beneath her foot gave way and Alice plummeted down into the darkness and—

—she landed on her back on a moving gurney... a ceiling passed above her rapidly, and she jerked as the gurney was pushed through double doors with a *bang!* Nurses in white habits and doctors in surgical wear surrounded the gurney as it was rushed down a corridor. Confused, Alice looked down at herself and saw that—

—her belly was horribly distended beneath the sheet, almost as if she were...

Pregnant! Alice thought, horrified.

"You're going to be all right," one of the doctors said through his green surgical mask. "I want you to do exactly what I say."

Alice sat up on the gurney and screamed, "No! This isn't happening!"

She froze. The gurney had stopped in the delivery room and she was staring at a crowd of observers... nurses, nuns, priests, and—

—herself!

The air around her became thick, seemed to shift, and, in the blink of an eye—

—she was standing in the group of observers looking at the gurney, where a young woman lay, her face glistening with perspiration, her eyes wide with pain and confusion. The woman—her dark brown hair clinging to her sweaty forehead—looked directly at Alice and hissed, "We must *end* the evil! You and me. We must… we *must*… we—"

Her body stiffened and she cried out in pain as she writhed in the clutches of a contraction.

"Work with me!" the doctor exclaimed. "C'mon… c'mon, now, breathe… here it comes… *breathe!"*

The woman jutted her pelvis as the doctor and a white-habited nurse leaned between her legs, and she opened her mouth as if to yawn, cried out in pain, and—

—the doctor groaned, "Sweet Jesus Christ, what… is… *that?"*

The nurse bundled something in a cloth and held it to her breast, murmuring, "One of God's creatures."

The woman on the gurney sat up and said breathlessly, "God had *nothing* to do with *that!"*

The nurse looked at her, shocked, her face turning almost as white as her habit.

"That child," the woman gasped, "was conceived in *pure… evil!"*

The nurse backed away from her, looking down at the baby and—

—tiny arms jutted from the cloth and small hands clutched the nurse's throat, making her stumble back against the wall, and as she slid to the floor, the child—the *thing*—shot from beneath the blanket and scurried across the floor like a giant insect, making a horrible braying sound as—

—the doctors and other nurses staggered backward, gasping at what they saw, and—

—Alice cried out as the small creature headed toward her, a blur of glistening gray and pink streaking across the floor, and Alice dove out of the way as the creature shot through the delivery room doors, and quickly getting to her feet, Alice turned to see that—

—the delivery room was *empty*.

Frightened but determined, Alice moved toward the swinging double doors of the delivery room and pushed through to see that—

—she was no longer in a hospital. Her surroundings had changed… for the *worst*…

Alice now stood in a church. Not just *any* church… it was the church in which she had last seen Freddy… the church in which she *thought* she'd defeated him and freed his young, helpless victims…

The dark church echoed with the bone-chilling animal-like shriek of the child-thing that had scurried out of the delivery room a few moments ago. It came from somewhere in the seemingly endless columns of pews.

Alice moved up the center aisle with caution, pausing a moment when the shrieking was replaced by an unspeakable wet gulping sound that seemed to draw nearer.

Up ahead, in a dusty heap on the floor at the foot of the pulpit, Alice spotted Freddy's remains: the tattered red and green striped sweater, the wrinkled hat and pants, the rusted claw that glimmered dully in a dusty shaft of stain-glassed light. Alice pressed on, muttering deliberately, "This is over… this is over," until—

—the gulping stopped and something moved from behind the pulpit.

Something small… vaguely human… with gleaming, flayed skin…

It ran its small tongue around its frayed lips as it moved toward Freddy's remains… and as it neared the small pile, it grew more and more human, taking on the all-too-familiar features of the man—the *thing*—that had once worn those clothes, that claw…

Seeing the sense of dark purpose in the creature's eyes, Alice screamed, "No! Goddammit, *nooo!"* and lunged toward the altar as—

—the creature scurried into Freddy's filthy pants, slobbering as it disappeared beneath the material, and—

—Alice ran up the aisle toward the altar, halted suddenly by the thunderous sound of wood being ripped like paper! The floor beneath the altar was splintering, breaking open, rising up to suddenly form a sort of wooden hill that threw Alice backward and off her feet. She crawled desperately up the growing incline, determined to stop what she was certain was about to happen—what she was certain she was powerless to prevent—all the while thinking, *This can't be happening! I can't be dreaming! I'M NOT ASLEEEEP!*

Wood groaned and cracked...

Glass shattered...

Plumes of choking dust filled the air...

Alice clawed at the lifting floor, trying to pull herself up the incline, keeping her eyes on Freddy's clothes as—

—they filled out, as if being inflated, and suddenly—

—the floor fell back into place with a great explosion of sound and dust and—

—Alice felt the impact through her entire body as—

—dead silence fell over the church.

Alice lay on the floor, still for a moment, then lifted her head. Her eyes fell on Freddy's clawed glove lying beside the altar.

A horribly burned hand reached out from behind the pulpit and snatched the glove up with a faint clatter.

Alice stiffened, scrambled to her feet and stared up at the altar. Beams of light filtered through the shifting dust as a vague figure appeared from behind the pulpit.

Knives scraped over wood.

A laugh cut the silence.

As the dust cleared she saw him—Freddy—staring down at himself, inspecting his body. Then he smiled at her and quipped, "It's a *boy*."

"No!" she screamed. *"You're dead!"*

"That never stopped me before..."

Growing furious, she shouted, "I closed the *door* on you!"

"Somebody must've left the key in the lock."

I fought him before, Alice thought, running determinedly up the center aisle, *I'll fight him again,* but—

—Freddy was gone. The only movement on the altar was dust.

"There's no such thing as safe sex," he said suddenly directly behind her.

Alice spun around to see his gruesome, filthy-toothed grin. He cackled as he lifted his razor-fingered hand, and—

—the church doors groaned as they swung open and a long rectangle of light fell down the center aisle over them.

Freddy spun around and Alice looked to the door to see—

—the woman who had given birth to the child-thing. She wore her bloody hospital gown and looked horribly pale. She pointed a finger at Freddy accusingly, and when she spoke, her voice sounded old... so *old*...

"You were conceived in fear and hatred... born in guilt and pain..."

She changed before Alice's eyes. She became old, her skin wrinkling, sagging... and the hospital gown she wore became a white nun's habit as she said, "I can never forgive you for what you've done..."

Alice realized that Freddy was backing away slowly, and she saw in his face, for the first time ever, utter *horror*. That horror quickly decayed into a burning rage, and he made a hateful sound deep in his throat as he spun around and, in a few quick steps, disappeared.

Turning to the door again, Alice saw the nun walking away. The doors swung closed slowly.

"Wait!" Alice called, hurrying after her, throwing the doors open to see—

—the Crave Inn.

The diner was completely empty, except for Anne, who tossed an angry glare at Alice from behind the register. Alice looked down at herself to see that she was wearing the clothes she'd put on for work.

"Why's it so empty?" she whispered.

"You're over four hours *late,* is why," Anne snapped, throwing an apron at Alice. "The party's probably over. You went. Didn't you?"

Alice didn't catch the apron and it dropped to the floor. "Four hours?" she breathed in a stunned whisper. She looked at the clock.

It read eleven-fifteen...

Chapter Four

Dan lay beside the pool, watching as Yvonne dove gracefully into the water. As the others applauded, Dan's eyes grew heavy and began to close. He figured it must have been the beer that Yvonne had brought; he'd had a couple and they'd probably made him sleepy. He leaned his head back and allowed himself to relax... to doze...

Somewhere in the murky darkness of his nap a telephone rang. Dan opened his eyes.

"So was I twice cool getting that pool key?" Yvonne asked as she seated herself beside him, dripping wet. "Or was I twice cool?"

Mark said, "Beats going over to Dan's and watching his dad's video of every single play Dan ran last season."

The telephone kept ringing... ringing and ringing...

Greta made a grand entrance then, wearing a beautiful red and black strapless dress.

"Gorgeous, as usual," Mark whispered.

"Thanks!" Greta called.

Mark blushed, embarrassed that she'd heard him.

"Too bad I missed the party getting dressed," she laughed, coming toward them.

Dan closed his eyes again as they talked, but was jolted suddenly by Mark. The telephone had stopped ringing and a jock in T-shirt and cutoffs stood before them.

"Dan, you gotta phone call in the office," the jock said.

As Dan headed for the office, Greta said, "Hey, that party Karen's friends are having will still be going. Let's go over there before Officer Beland gets back."

"You *hate* Karen!" Yvonne said.

"Yeah, but I *love* my new dress..."

In the cluttered office Dan picked up the telephone. "Hello?"

"Dan?" It was Alice, and she sounded frantic. "It happened again. Just *now*. And this time I wasn't even *asleep!"*

"What?"

"Something very weird is happening, Dan. It's Krueger again... but he's stronger... and this time he wants something *different."*

"Where are you?"

"I'm at work. Please... *hurry..."*

Dan rushed out of the office and past the pool.

"Is there a fire?" Mark asked.

"I've just... gotta go. See ya."

In his truck, as he sped through the night, Dan began to feel sleepy again. He turned on the radio with the volume high and caught a call-in talk show. It was one he'd heard before, with a typically abrasive host who abused his guests and callers.

"Right, lady," the host growled, "and Frank Sinatra killed Marilyn because the Kennedy's put fluoride in his water. What's the *matter,* lady? Did you go off your *medication?"*

The caller replied urgently, "But what the CIA is doing in Central America is a very real issue and I—"

"You wanna talk *issue,* lady? How about the *crap* that's *issuing* from your *mouth?"* He cut her off with a click and said, "Springwood, you're on the air."

"Yes," a woman said, "I'm calling about my son. He's an ungrateful bastard!"

Dan blinked in shock. The voice was so familiar! But... it couldn't be.

"His father and I have slaved to see that he gets a good education, and *now* he wants to throw his life away and take a worthless little *bitch* to *Europe!"*

"Mom!" Dan barked, nearly swerving the truck.

"Well, if I were you, lady," the host said, "I'd *kill* the little piggy!"

Dan quickly changed the station, and loud speed metal pounded from the speakers. His hands trembled as he steered, horrified by his mother's words. His headlights sliced the night as the truck picked up speed.

"Mom..." he whispered, confused and hurt.

The truck was going faster now... faster and faster... the music on the radio grew louder, although Dan had not adjusted the volume.

Dan started to lift his foot from the gas pedal, but something made a sound on the floorboard and he looked down to see—

—four glistening metal cables with transparent viscous skins snaking out of the floorboard and around his foot, pulling it down on the gas pedal! He cried out, struggling to pull his foot free, but the cables were stronger and the truck plunged forward, going faster... faster... *faster*...

Something touched his arms and he looked down in horror as—

—the safety belt slithered around his arms and pried them away from the steering wheel. As the truck careened across the center divider, Dan screamed and struggled with the belts, finally jerking his arms free and trying to regain control of the truck. It was no use; the truck had reached an incredible speed. The hood flew up, obscuring Dan's view, then flew from its hinges and into the night. Everything around Dan became a dark blur, until—

—he found himself looking out the windshield at rusted pulley chains hanging from above. The hooks on the ends of the chains clanged against the sides of the truck as it plummeted through them, heading toward—

—an open furnace glowing with flames. As Dan stared into the nearing inferno, he realized with sickening clarity what was happening and turned to kick his way out the passenger door, but—

—Freddy sat beside him, grinning.

"Buckle up," Freddy laughed as—

—the truck crashed into the furnace, into the flames, and, screaming, Dan stood up behind the wheel, but—

—the furnace was gone and the truck was speeding down the road again.

"Stop it, Krueger!" Dan screamed as the safety belt began to snake over his lap again, moving toward his arms. Reaching for the stick shift to shift down, Dan closed his fist around the gear knob and—

—long blades sprang from the small plastic sphere and closed like fingers around Dan's hand. They *were* fingers—*Freddy's* fingers—and the razor-sharp edges sliced cleanly through Dan's flesh, drawing blood. He slammed his foot onto the brake and the truck came to such a sudden halt that the rear end rose three feet off the

road. He looked out the windows to see that he was in the boiler room again, the truck motionless now. The chains and hooks clanged gently against the body of the truck, as if moved by a slight breeze.

"Son of a bitch," Dan hissed, holding his breath, until—

—the chains began to move, wrapping themselves around the truck and becoming taut as they lifted the vehicle off the ground and into the air, moving it slowly toward the raging boiler up ahead.

The pickup's interior grew hot quickly as the flames drew nearer, and Dan panicked, fumbling to open the door, but—

—the handle would not budge, and he began kicking the door frantically as—

—the flames licked the truck and slithered across the windshield, shattering the glass, and—

—Dan screamed one final time as—

—he sat up on his towel beside the pool, startled by the ringing of a telephone.

His right hand was bleeding...

Dan struggled to his feet, hurried into the office and answered the telephone.

"Dan?" Alice asked. "You're... okay?"

"Yeah, yeah... I think. I'll tell you when I get there. I'm on my way." He hung up and rubbed his eyes a moment, breathing deeply. He still felt tired, but he *couldn't* go back to sleep; he had to get to Alice.

Something was very wrong...

He started out of the office when a man's voice said quietly, "Clean-up time."

Dan froze, certain he was being confronted by Freddy again. He turned to see Officer Beland standing at the edge of the pool. His eyes were narrowed angrily above chubby cheeks, and the lights from beneath the pool cast his shadow on the wall in an enormous wavering blob of darkness.

Beland gestured toward the empty beer cans scattered around the pool and said, "You kids have a good time?"

I don't have time for this shit! Dan thought as he bolted for the door.

"Hey, come back here!" Beland called.

Dan jogged across the parking lot toward his truck, knowing the fat little man would never catch up with him. He opened the truck's door, hiked up a leg to get in, but—

—he realized he'd left his keys beside the pool. He turned back to see Beland waddling across the parking lot, huffing and puffing.

Turning to Beland's motorcycle parked just a few feet away, he hesitated a moment, then thought, *What the hell,* and hopped onto the bike, kicking it to life.

"Come back with my bike, you little prick!" Beland shouted as Dan roared into the night.

As he sped away from the university and headed for the Crave Inn, the motorcycle wobbled indecisively beneath him. The closest Dan had ever come to driving a motorcycle was five years ago, when he'd tried out his cousin's new minibike, so he was not feeling very confident. As he began to grow more comfortable on the bike—

—the front wheel was thrown upward into a wheelie and the engine gave a bone-shuddering growl as the bike shot down the road at a suddenly accelerated speed... a *frightening* speed...

As he struggled to keep the motorcycle balanced, Dan clutched the brakes, but with no results. The bike moved faster and faster through the night, and the lights of the houses along the road became a creamy blur as the bike's frame began to vibrate dangerously beneath him. He dodged oncoming headlights that shot past him like missiles. When he looked down at the gauges, he saw that each one was trembling at its maximum capacity.

When it seemed the motorcycle could go no faster, it increased its speed even more, and Dan felt his face distort as if it were melting beneath the g forces, felt his eyes sting, and suddenly—

—the gauges began to spit sparks and their glass faces cracked and Dan struggled to look down as—

—the gauges sizzled and melted into a glistening mound of liquid metal and plastic, undulating wetly, beginning to slowly change shape, almost as if they were... taking on facial features... almost—but not quite—*human* features.

"Kruuueeegerrr!" Dan screamed as the face grinned up at him from the space occupied, moments ago, by the bike's gauges.

The brake levers on the handlebars split with a metallic *clang* into four long shiny blades and clamped down over Dan's hands, pressing harder and harder, until they cut into the flesh between his knuckles and—

—riblike ridges rose up from the glossy black gas tank, creating a sort of torso beneath the grinning face; the torso began to expand and contract with deep breaths. The ribs extended downward on each side of the bike, forming organic, *breathing* pipes that disappeared into the bike's engine, and—

—each pipe began to bulge and throb, as if something were pressing to get out, until new exhaust pipes appeared with a sound like splintering bone. They began to glow a deep, burning red as they grew hotter and hotter, until—

—they wrapped around Dan's bare legs, blackening his skin with a crackling sizzle, and—

—the claws on the handlebars reached up suddenly, grabbed Dan's shoulders and jerked him down until his tortured face was inches from Freddy's.

"Let the good times *roll!"* Freddy laughed, pushing him upright again, and—

—Dan screamed as the claws raked down his bare arms, cutting red trails through the flesh as the pipes burned into his legs, cooking their way through muscle tissue, and—

—his scream became a pathetic gurgle in his throat when he saw the headlights of his own truck rushing head-on toward the motorcycle, and—

—metal screamed and glass shattered as Dan tumbled from the bike and broke through the windshield of his truck, landing upright behind the wheel as the truck sped on into the night. He clutched the wheel and felt for the brake pedal to slow the truck. Something moved beside him. He glanced to his right to see—

—Freddy, leaning casually against the passenger door as lights streaked by outside. He hissed, "Freddy says, 'Don't *dream*... and *drive.'"* He pointed ahead through the windshield, and Dan followed his gaze as—

—a monstrous semi thundered down on them, its horn roaring, and Dan screamed, *"Aaaaliiice!"* as—

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—Alice slapped a juicy-pink hamburger patty onto the grill and pressed it down with the spatula as the radio played tinny rock and roll. As the meat sizzled, she picked up the coffeepot to pour a cup for her single late-night customer, when suddenly—

—the room seemed to melt around her and the sounds—the sizzling burger and the radio—decayed into warbling gurgles, and Alice dropped the coffeepot to the floor as—

—the wall ahead of her melted away like hot wax and she was looking down a long deserted road beneath a starry sky. Far up ahead, headlights appeared like pinpricks of light. They grew larger and larger... larger still... and she recognized Dan's truck, began to hear his voice—

—*"Aaaaliiice! Aaaaliiice!"*—

—and even saw his face more and more clearly as the truck bore down on her at an incredible speed, and just as she noticed Dan was not alone inside—

—the truck reached her, looked as if it might run her down, but instead—

—it disappeared, leaving only Dan's face before her, growing larger and larger, until it completely filled her vision, then—

—it stopped, cried *"Aaaaliiice!"* one more time, then began to fall away from her, and she tried unsuccessfully to catch him, as—

—Dan fell down a long, pink, membranous tunnel... the walls pulsated around him... juices glistened as they gathered between the folds of the smooth pink membrane... and as Dan disappeared—

—Alice doubled over suddenly, clutching her stomach as a deadly pain ripped through her abdomen. She staggered against the counter, crying out in pain, gasping for breath until the pain passed.

When she stood, the image was gone. She was back in the diner, and her customer was leaning over the counter, calling, "You okay? Honey? You okay? You want me to call—"

"No!" she shouted, dashing toward the door. "No, no, please, God, *no!"* Feeling sick with dread, she ran into the street and looked in the direction from which she knew Dan would come.

Alice clawed her face and screamed.

Several hundred yards down the street a jackknifed semi was curled around a flaming wad of crumpled metal. A jammed horn wailed in the night.

Panicking, Alice ran toward the accident, and the horn grew louder in her ears as she rounded the truck and—

—a man lurched from around the corner, his face badly cut and bleeding. He grabbed Alice's shoulders and shook her, screaming, "He came outta nowhere! *Nowhere!* Like he was going a thousand miles an hour! Like—like—like he was on a *fucking rocket to hell!"*

Sirens grew closer as Alice tore herself away from the hysterical truck driver and turned to see—

—Dan. She staggered backward, bile rising from her gut.

His face was gone. So was part of his *head*. He was pinned in the mass of charred metal, and the fire was toying with his skin.

Alice spun away from it as the night filled with flashing red and blue lights. She dropped to her knees, and then the pavement began to fly up toward her face.

Alice passed out...

Chapter Five

Alice opened her eyes to see Yvonne sitting beside her bed, wearing her white uniform and name tag.

Yvonne stood and touched Alice's arm, whispering, "God, Alice, I'm so, um... so..."

It took a moment for realization to wash over Alice, but when it did—when she remembered the horrible vision she'd had and the carnage she'd seen in the street outside the Crave Inn—she sat bolt upright and hissed, "It was Freddy! My God, he used to do it when I was asleep... *just* when I was asleep... but something's changed that!"

"Hey, hey, slow down, you're not making sense."

"Where am I?"

"In the *hospital*. Under observation."

"How did Dan die?"

Yvonne blinked at her, confused, and said, "In an accident... with a semi..."

"Yeah, see... he can *do* that... make your dream death look like something *real!"* Alice's panic gathered like phlegm in her throat and her words stammered to a halt.

When Yvonne glanced across the room, Alice followed her gaze and saw a long rectangular window. On the other side of the glass stood her dad, the Jordans, and a tall balding man in a white coat with a stethoscope dangling from the coat's pocket.

"Look, maybe I'd better get Dr. Morris," Yvonne said.

Alice snapped, "No, maybe you'd better *listen* to *me,* because *he's just getting started!"*

The door was pushed open and Alice's dad followed the doctor into the room. The doctor's name tag read, DR. L. MORRIS.

When her dad took her hand, Alice ignored the doctor and whispered, "Daddy, it's started again. Like before, with Rick and everybody. Daddy, please... *tell* them what *happened."*

As Alice spoke, Dr. Morris stood at the foot of her bed and watched her intently, chewing his lower lip. When she was finished, her dad looked at the doctor, who said to Alice quietly, "You've had a terrible

shock." Then, to her father, he said, "This sort of outburst is often more dramatic than serious. Many women experience moments of mild hysteria in the first few months... even those who haven't suffered a traumatic shock. It's really nothing to worry about."

Alice felt dizzy with confusion, and breathed, "Daddy...?" When he averted his eyes, she turned to Dr. Morris.

"You blacked out," the doctor said. "I wanted to do a full checkup."

"What? *Why?* What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he said with a shrug. "You're pregnant."

A numbness overwhelmed Alice as she gaped at Dr. Morris.

He went on: "We're going to keep you here overnight. Just for observation... to make sure you're well and comfortable."

The doctor's last words were a muffled hum. Alice stared as if looking straight through him and mumbled to herself over and over again, "Pregnant... pregnant..."

***

Alice was ready to leave the hospital just before dawn the next morning. Yvonne breezed into her room and said, "You got everything you need?"

"Yeah."

"I've gotta start my rounds. I'll check up on you later. We can leave together when my shift's over."

As Yvonne started to leave, Alice called her name softly and she turned, smiling. "I don't feel anything," Alice whispered.

"What?"

"Well... I want to be happy about the baby... because it's *Dan's* baby... but I just feel sort of... *angry*. Angry that Dan's dead and angry that I traded him for this... this life that I don't even *know*. But that's all I feel. Anger. I can't seem to feel anything else."

Yvonne hesitated a moment, then said, "I think right now is a little too soon to be thinking about any of this. Am I right?"

Alice nodded half-heartedly.

"Look, I'll be *right* back when I'm done with my rounds. Why don't you get some rest."

"Yvonne?"

She stopped and turned in the doorway again.

"I told you about... about him. Freddy. And I'd like to tell everyone else. I *need* to. As soon as they'll let me out of here."

Yvonne looked around the room as if embarrassed, then said abruptly, "I've gotta start my rounds." She left the room quickly.

Alice sat on the edge of her bed, and with a sigh put her face in her hands. It was the same thing all over again... no one would believe her... they would think she was crazy... and the deaths would go on and on and on...

"Hi."

She lifted her head with a gasp and saw a little boy standing in the open doorway. He was frail-looking, with an angelic quality about him. His skin was pale, almost translucent, and he wore a white hospital gown, which made him look sort of like a little ghost. But even more unsettling were his eyes: one was green, the other blue...

"Hello," she said tentatively. They looked at one another for a long moment—she uncertain, and he with a gentle smile on his lips—before she spoke again. "Are you a patient here?"

"Yeah, I... guess so."

"What's your name?"

"Jacob."

"Jacob. Well... that's a nice name." She waited for him to speak again; when he didn't, she asked, "Should you be out of your room right now, Jacob?"

"Oh, I'm not that far away from it."

"Would your mom want you in here?"

"I... don't know," he said, a little sadly. His eyebrows lifted and he said abruptly, "Your boyfriend died in a car wreck, huh?"

Alice flinched at his words. "How did you know that?"

"I'm sorry it happened. I just... wanted to see if you were all right."

With that, he smiled bashfully and turned to leave.

"Wait, Jacob," Alice called. "You don't have to go..."

But he was gone...

***

As they left the hospital together later that morning, Alice asked Yvonne, "Hey, you know a little kid named Jacob? Maybe six or seven? He's got... different-colored eyes."

"Seven's a little young for me," Yvonne chuckled as they got into the elevator. "What about him?"

"He came to my room after you left this morning. He was in a hospital gown. I just wondered what was wrong with him."

"Well, aside from the fact that there are no visitors allowed in the building between nine at night and nine in the morning, and that there's no children's wing in this hospital, absolutely nothing, far as I know."

Alice frowned, confused. "You're sure?"

"Positive." The elevator stopped and opened and Yvonne said, "C'mon. Everybody's waiting for us at the Crave Inn..."

When she was finished telling her story in the Crave Inn, Alice looked around the table from Yvonne to Greta to Mark, who squinted and said, in a somewhat embarrassed voice, "Look Alice, um... a guy out of your dreams did *not* kill Dan. It was an *accident."*

"Mark, this *isn't* something new," she said, trying to be patient. "Didn't you ever hear of what happened to my brother and my friends. Didn't *Dan* ever tell you about it?"

He shook his head. "He never wanted to talk about it."

The disbelief in the faces around the table frightened her; she'd expected it, but it frightened her nonetheless. "Look, you guys," she said, "I'm nor making this *up!* He gets in through me... through my *dreams*. I bring other people to him. It's something I thought I could control, something I could fight, but..." Her voice trailed off.

Greta said firmly, "Alice, when Dan had the accident, you weren't dreaming. You were *here*. At *work*. Am I right?"

Alice nodded reluctantly because that was the confusing part, the part she couldn't understand. It had *never* happened while she was awake before.

"So," Greta went on, "how did he—"

"There isn't any *how* or *he!"* Mark interrupted adamantly. He took Alice's hand and squeezed it affectionately, trying to hide the

irritation in his voice. "You've been through a lot, Alice, we all know that. But don't let it get to you. Don't let it... *do* this to you."

Alice tried to hold back her tears of frustration and dread. They weren't believing her... and she was afraid for them...

Alice was in the kitchen pouring cream into a cup of coffee when her dad got home. He hugged two grocery bags to his chest and set them down on the kitchen table.

"Had your dinner yet?" he asked flatly.

She hesitated, unsure of his mood. "No. I was waiting for you to get home from your meeting."

"Get a spoon." He reached into one of the bags.

She took a spoon from the drawer and asked, "What's this?"

"Practice." He removed several jars of baby food from the bag.

She stared at them, a little confused at first, then very apprehensive.

"Don't worry," he said with a wink, something he hadn't done since she was a little girl, "you don't have to turn into Super Mom overnight. This hasn't exactly been the best weekend of your life. I just thought you'd like to... well, start with the peaches. They were always *your* favorite." He managed a slight smile, more than he usually did, and looked away from her, embarrassed.

She felt a rush of love for him and stepped forward, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. Then she opened a jar of mashed peaches and dug in...

Chapter Six

The day of Dan's funeral, Greta Gibson was miserable. Actually, *miserable* was too tame a word...

Her mother—who insisted that Greta call her by her first name, Racine, rather than "Mother" or "Mom"—was throwing one of her famous dinner parties. At least, they were famous among the circles of people who attended them, but they were not the kind of people with whom Greta preferred to associate. They were what she called "trendies," and she despised them. What she despised even more was the fact that her mother had been trying, for all of Greta's life, to turn her *into* one of them. True, it was Greta's ambition to be a fashion model; she looked forward with great excitement to posing for the cameras. But it was also true that a career as a model would require her to hang out with more trendies. Greta saw that as a severe drawback. Racine knew that and was trying to change her mind about the trendies, trying to groom her for the future.

Greta was seated at the opposite end of the table from Racine, hoping to avoid being noticed by any of her mother's friends. At the other end of the room Racine talked about Greta with a man dressed in an Italian suit; his sandy hair was ultrashort and he wore glasses with large, red, trendy frames. He nodded a lot and glanced from Racine to Greta and back again. He leaned toward Racine, murmured something, and she grinned, replying, "You know, you're *right*. People are *always* mistaking us for sisters."

Greta looked at her mother with distaste; the woman was a few years past forty and didn't look at *all* like Greta's sister. Greta looked around at the decor with equal distaste; she thought of it as "wanna-be Manhattan"—a lot of cold, artificial-looking Korean high-tech furniture—and she decided the guests matched it perfectly: cold and artificial.

The man at the end of the table—his name was Lorne and he was a sort of New Age past-life therapist—smiled at Greta and said, "You're not eating. Are you a vegetarian?"

"Greta's more of a *nothingatarian,"* Racine said. "You know, Greta, dear, you should at least try the monk fish. It's *imported."*

Greta resisted rolling her eyes in disgust. Racine was always harping on her to keep her figure—"For the cameras," she'd say—but, at the same time, she was always harping on her to *eat;* it made no sense.

A woman to Greta's left named Jody, whose clothes were a cross between Beverly Hills chic and Gypsy audacity, said, "You know, Greta *does* have the perfect body for modeling. In *fact*... I'm in New York quite often. I see Eileen Ford from time to time. I'd be happy to talk to her about you." She smiled at Greta, flashing capped teeth beneath an adjusted nose.

Greta smiled half-heartedly and looked down at her plate, toying with her food.

"Greta," Racine drawled, "Jody is offering you the chance of a *lifetime."* She turned to Jody and said, "All Greta *ever* talks about is making it in Manhattan."

The truth was, Greta seldom talked to her mother, because she never had anything to say that Racine wanted to hear; all *she* wanted to hear was trendy gossip about trendy people. Greta felt a surge of anger and let her fork clatter onto her plate as she said deliberately, "We buried one of my best friends today, *Mother."*

There was a flustered silence around the table; Lorne broke it by muttering, "The Jordan boy. A good ball player."

Racine said stiffly, "Rick Jordan was a—"

"Dan!" Greta interrupted. "Dan Jordan."

"He was a good friend of Greta's," Racine continued. "Not someone she was *seeing,* you understand. Just a friend."

A man who looked like someone in a yuppie beer commercial said, "It's reminiscent of Fitzgerald. Although, in *his* stories, it's generally the *women* who die violently."

"My God, I haven't read Fitzgerald in *ages,"* said a woman who looked like a department-store mannequin. "All I really remember about him is that everyone in his books is over the hill by the time they're nineteen. Is that right? I remember reading once that Fitzgerald..."

They were off again, having another trendy conversation about another trendy subject. Greta stared at her plate, feeling tired. She hadn't slept well since Dan's death—how *could* she, the way Alice was carrying on—but she suddenly felt unbearably tired. She closed her eyes... just for a moment... tuning out the droning voices around her... trying not to think about where she was... and—

—she jerked her head up suddenly, with a start.

Racine's face was inches from Greta's; she was standing beside Greta, leaning forward with a stern look on her face, hissing, "You've *got* to at least try the *fish*. Our guests will think there's something *wrong* with it!"

"Yes," Lorne prodded at the other end of the table, "come on. Have a little."

To keep peace, Greta begrudgingly cut off a tiny piece of fish.

As if he were talking to a child, the yuppie beer-commercial man said, "Mmmm, *good*. See?" He popped a morsel into his mouth and chewed loudly.

Sickened by the man's patronizing attitude, Greta put her fork down.

Racine said, "Would you like me to have the caterer bring in something else?" She called over her shoulder, *"Frederick!"*

The name sent a chill down Greta's spine. She looked down at the table, taking in a deep breath as her mother took her plate away and another hand replaced it with a new one... a horribly scarred hand wearing a glove that had knives attached to the fingers. Greta sucked in a breath sharply and looked up, but—

—the kitchen door was already swinging closed and the caterer was gone. She looked down at the plate again; it was covered, with four piles of different kinds of... *mush*. Like baby food...

"Wittle Gweta gonna cwean her pwate for Mommy wike a good girl?" Racine cooed, scooping some of the mush into a spoon and lifting it to Greta's mouth.

Disgusted, Greta turned her head away and tried to lift a hand to push the spoon from her mouth, but she couldn't move either of her arms. She looked down and saw that—

—she was sitting in a filthy, rusted old high chair and her arms were held down beneath the dirty tray that covered her lap. Greta froze for a moment, thinking, *Wait a minute... wait* just *a minute!*

"C'mon, a big bite for Mommy," Racine said, pressing the spoon of goop to Greta's lips.

With little choice in the matter, Greta opened her mouth and took in the slop; some of it spattered on her chin.

Racine drawled, *"Therrrre's* Mommy's good girl," scooping up another spoonful of the stuff. She shoved it hard into Greta's mouth before Greta could resist, then scooped up another. She pushed spoonful after spoonful into Greta's mouth, pressing the spoon to the roof of her mouth before slipping it out and dribbling the goop on her chin. Bits of it clung to Greta's face as she struggled in the high chair, trying to cry out but unable to make anything more than a gargling sound. Glops of the slimy substance slapped onto Greta's dress and splashed on her arms. She thought she could almost feel it caking on her, growing dry and crusty. All the while the trendies seated around the table smiled and nodded; some of them even broke into quiet applause now and then.

Greta jerked her head back and forth and finally spat out a mouthful of the goop, clenching her eyes shut and trying to speak, to protest, but when she opened her eyes she gasped, because—

—a wiry man with horribly burned skin, wearing a tattered hat and an old red and green sweater, stood before her. He lifted a hand and —

—it was *the* hand... the razor-clawed hand she'd seen a few moments ago... the hand Alice had spoken of... and the man grinned as—

—he moved the hand toward her face so she could see what he held delicately between his thumb and forefinger. It was a tiny, miniature version of herself, squirming and crying out in agony and fear.

"You are what you eat," he chuckled, using his other hand to force her mouth open.

Greta tried to scream, tried to call for her mother—even for Alice—but nothing came from her mouth except little gobules of the mush

her mother had been feeding her. She struggled, trying to fight his iron grip, but it was useless.

He pried her mouth open, held the tiny creature—*Me!* she thought frantically; *that's meeee!*—and plopped it onto her tongue, then pressed her jaw up until her teeth clacked together.

She felt the miniature version of herself squirming in her clamped mouth, and tried to lower her jaw again, but Freddy's grip was too strong. The thing in her mouth crawled backward down her tongue, squirming, wriggling, until—

—it slid down her throat and—

—then it stopped.

She tried to take in a breath but could not; she tried to exhale but could not. It was lodged in her throat, writhing... kicking and scratching... crying out in a needle-thin voice.

The guests at the table smiled wider... laughed louder... applauded harder...

... and Greta strangled...

***

The baby food wasn't bad... it wasn't bad at all.

Alice opened a third jar, and as she twisted the jar's lid—

—it made a muffled burping sound and yellow, vomitous mush slapped onto the wall before her. She stared at it as it oozed down the wall... slowly... then she realized that—

—the baby food was not dribbling toward the floor but moving with purpose over the wall... taking *shape*... forming a set of long vertical lips, like a mouth, except—

—it *wasn't* a mouth because the lips split, forming several flowery delicate folds that opened, and—

—Greta's head and shoulders oozed from between them as she screamed, "Alice! *Help meee!*" She reached out a hand as the lips began to close around her again, sucking her back in with horrible slurping sounds.

Alice lunged forward and grabbed Greta's arms, pulling with all her might, but they were slippery and she quickly lost her grip.

Instead, she reached forward and wrapped her fingers around the fleshy lips and tried to pry them apart, pulling harder and harder, until—

—they finally gave and opened up, but before Alice could grab hold of her, Greta fell away from her, screaming as she disappeared down the long membranous tunnel in which she'd seen Dan fall only days ago. Holding the enormous lips open, Alice screamed, "Greta! Greta, I'm *sorry!* Gre—"

The lips slapped shut and disappeared.

Alice stood in the kitchen a moment, then spun around and screamed for her dad, but she could hear the shower hissing upstairs, and turned instead to the telephone, grabbed the receiver and began punching in Greta's number. But before she was finished—

—her insides were seized by a sharp pain that tightened its grip until she dropped the receiver and lurched forward, leaning against the wall. She fell to her knees, cried out and then—

—it was gone.

She leaned back against the cupboards with a quavering sigh and breathed, "Dear God, what's happening...?"

Chapter Seven

Mark heard someone coming up the stairs to his room and quickly lifted a comic book in front of his face. He'd been lying on his bed crying softly for over an hour.

How could it happen? he'd asked himself again and again. *With all those people at the table—how could it happen?*

He'd heard about Greta's death that morning, and had been devastated. He'd stayed in his room all day.

Mark's room was actually the attic that he'd converted into a sort of studio apartment. It was cluttered with his enormous comic-book collection, and above his drawing table he'd built a platform bed for his king-sized mattress, with a rickety ladder leading up from the floor. The whole thing was precariously nailed together but, for all its creaking and wobbling, it seemed sturdy enough.

There was a knock at the door and Alice called, "Mark? You all right?"

"Sure," he said, quickly wiping his eyes. "C'mon in."

She came in, followed by Yvonne in her nurse's uniform.

"You mind if we stick around for a while?" Yvonne asked.

"If you want." He did not take his eyes from the comic book; he was afraid to look at them, afraid they'd know.

The bed creaked and jittered as they climbed up the ladder and sat down beside him.

"You know," Yvonne said, "someday this whole thing's gonna fall flat. You oughtta nail it together better."

He shrugged, still staring blindly at the comic book. They were silent for the longest time. It was a silence filled with the unspoken but deafening grief they all felt.

Finally, Alice whispered, "She must've fallen asleep at the table. That's the only explanation I can..."

As her voice trailed off, Mark finally looked up from his comic book and glared at her, waiting, just *waiting* for her to mention one word about that stupid nightmare story of hers.

"But," she went on, "I still don't know why this is happening while I'm *awake*. I've got to figure out how he's getting in!"

Mark threw his comic book against the wall and snapped, "I really don't need to hear this shit now, okay?"

"But it's *true,* Mark," she hissed. "I have *one* dream about Krueger, and a few days later two of us are *dead!"*

"Alice, will you juh-just... just *shut up!"* Mark shouted, clenching his fists. She was startled by his outburst. He looked at her and continued quietly. "I loved Greta. I... I knew I never stood a chance in hell with her, but I *loved* her, and I'm having... you know, um—" He fought back his tears, sickened by them. "I'm having a hard enough time dealing with the fact that she choked to death on a fucking piece of *fish!* I don't need to hear your bullshit about some asshole from dreamland. I... I just... wanna be left alone. Okay?"

Alice reached out tentatively and squeezed his shoulder, nodding, then she and Yvonne climbed carefully down the ladder.

Mark lifted the comic book again and tried to at least look at the pictures, but his eyes blurred with tears. He felt sick inside, knotted up, and... he *didn't* want to be alone. He sat up quickly and said, "Hey, um... would you guys mind... y'know, just... hanging around for a while? We wouldn't have to talk, if you don't want to."

"I've gotta go to work,'Yvonne said apologetically.

Alice smiled. "I'll stay..."

***

A few hours later—hours of talking about Greta and their times together—Mark sat down at his drawing table and Alice looked over his shoulder as he paged through a book he'd been preparing for Greta. It was filled with drawings of all of them: Mark, Greta, Yvonne, Alice, and Dan...

"I was going to finish it up... 'Our Senior Year Adventures,' something like that, and... well, I wanted to give it to her before she went to New York, but..."

"She would've liked that," Alice whispered. "It's very good. Really."

He closed the book gently, set it down beside a drawing of his own house and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, then smiled up at Alice and said, "So. Pregnant, huh?"

"Yeah. And having a little trouble getting used to the idea."

"Well... I think it's great. I kinda think that... well, y'know, Dan would've liked *that* too."

Alice stifled a yawn and stretched her arms above her head.

"Tired?" Mark asked. "My dad's usually got some coffee in the pot by now."

"I'll go get us some," Alice said, heading for the door. "Be right back."

Mark watched her go, glad that he'd asked her to stay. He felt pretty tired himself. Not actually *sleepy,* but like he needed to lie down. He took off his shoes and socks, climbed onto his bed and curled up... just for a few minutes... until Alice got back...

***

A few minutes later Alice climbed the stairs with two steaming cups of coffee and entered Mark's room, saying, "Here it is, piping hot and good to the last drop." She looked around, but could find Mark nowhere. She called his name a couple of times, turning around and around, searching the room for him.

Mark was gone.

She set the coffee cups down on his drawing table and gasped when she saw that—

—the drawing of Mark's house was *moving!* The house was decomposing, coming to pieces, then reforming into a picture of *another* house... an old, rundown boarded-up house...

Freddy's house.

On the porch lay a typical Welcome mat, but from the mat rose tiny rusted-metal spikes that looked sharp as needles.

As if being sketched rapidly by an invisible hand and pen, a figure appeared before the house. Mark...

"Dammit, Krueger, *no!"* she shouted.

In the picture Mark stood before the house looking around in confusion, then started to step toward the door, toward the mat...

"No, Mark, don't!" Alice cried, stepping away from the table and shutting her eyes tightly, concentrating on Mark and the Krueger house with every ounce of her strength, until—

—the air around her seemed to be sucked out of the room with a deafening *whoosh!* and, a heartbeat later, Alice was sucked out with it, pulled backward so hard and fast that her hair slapped around her head and her arms and legs flew forward, until—

—she was standing a few feet behind Mark in front of the ominous gray house, and he was about to step onto the spiked Welcome mat in his bare feet as—

—she threw herself forward, shouting, *"Don't,* Mark!" but—

—it was too late.

Mark's foot pressed down on the mat and blood began to pool immediately between the small rusted spikes. Mark froze with his other foot held inches above the mat, looked down, confused, then whimpered, "Ow..." As if he did not yet understand the source of the pain, Mark put his other foot down, then reached for the doorknob.

Alice clutched his shoulder and said, "Mark... Mark, do you *hear* me? Wake up!"

He looked at her as if she were a stranger and blinked several times. "Alice?" he said finally looking around with growing shock at his surroundings.

"Wake *up,* Mark, wake up *now,* before he comes!"

"Before... *who* comes?"

"Freddy!"

"Alice," he whispered as his eyes narrowed in pain, "my feet... my *feet,* Alice..." He looked down slowly and—

—then he was gone in a vaporous puff.

Relieved, Alice faced the house and, burning with anger, growled, "All right, Krueger, you son of a *bitch!"* She stepped over the mat, threw the door open and stalked into the house. "You stay *away* from me, Krueger!" she shouted as she went down the hall, throwing doors open and checking each room for a sign of Freddy's presence. She went upstairs to continue her search. "Stay out of my *life!* Leave

my friends *alone!"* She burst into a musty old bedroom, found nothing, then into another room, finding only cobwebs and covered furniture.

Beyond the door at the end of the hall, she found a steep narrow staircase. It was treacherously dark, but she climbed the creaky stairs to the attic above and opened the door. Plumes of dust rose into the air like a mist, dancing in the beam of light that shined in through a broken window.

"Where are you, Freddy?" she said quietly; the tears in her eyes did not help her to sound very convincing when she declared, "I'm not afraid of you. Not *anymore!"*

The skittering of a rat in a dark corner was the only response...

Deciding it was pointless to go on searching, Alice turned and—

—Jacob said, "Hi."

She gasped and staggered backward, slapping a hand over her pounding chest. "You *scared* me, Jacob. What... What're you doing here?"

"Dan would've wanted me to be with you." He stood in the doorway, still wearing his hospital gown, still pale, and looking even more sickly than he had before.

"You knew Dan?" Alice asked suspiciously.

"Kind of..."

"Does your mom know you're here?"

"My mom's too busy to care where I am."

Alice knelt down before him and whispered, "Oh, I'm sure she cares."

"It doesn't matter. I've got a *new* friend now. He knows all *kindsa* neat games..."

Alice ignored his words; she was too full of questions about this odd child. She finally asked, "Who *are* you, Jacob?"

He smiled again. "I'm sorry about your friend Greta."

"How did you know about *that?"*

Again he ignored her question, turning with childlike preoccupation to look down the stairs behind him. "Hey... he's gone. My friend's gone." Without so much as a glance back at Alice, the boy hurried down the stairs and disappeared into the hungry darkness.

"Jacob!" she called, following him. "You shouldn't be alone in here, Jacob! Jacob? Where are you go—"

The dark attic stairway was gone and Alice stood before Mark's drawing table. There was a loud creaking sound above her, and she looked up with a gasp as—

—Mark sat up in his bed and looked down at her with confused and sleepy eyes. He swung his legs off the bed; his feet were bleeding from small puncture wounds.

"How could it have happened?" Alice breathed, talking to herself as she paced. "I was *awake!* How could it... he was *there,* in the house. I *know* he was. But then... where did he go? Why didn't he come for us? And why was *Jacob* there?"

"My feet," Mark whispered, examining his injuries. He looked down at her with confusion and fear. "Alice... my *feet*. It was... *real*. I thought I was dreaming, but... Alice? Maybe you oughtta tell me a little more about this..."

Chapter Eight

When Yvonne's shift ended early the next morning, she went straight to the university locker room and changed from her uniform into a bikini. It had been a rough night and she was looking forward to a long rest in the steam room, then a few laps around the pool.

In the steam room she sat with her back to the wall, hugging one leg to her breasts. She needed some time alone, away from work and even her friends; she'd been so busy lately, she'd had no time to just relax and think a while... about Dan... about Greta...

The hot steam massaged her stiff muscles... loosened them... relieved their aches... wrapped her in a blanket of clinging warmth...

She leaned her head back, closed her eyes, and—

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—sat up with a gasp, drenched with perspiration. "Damn," she hissed, chiding herself for falling asleep; she couldn't afford to spend the whole *morning* in the steam room.

Yvonne stood and left the room, went to the pool and climbed up to the diving board. Still feeling groggy, she stopped to rub her eyes before walking out onto the board, and—

—the diving board lurched suddenly, nearly knocking her over the side to the concrete thirty feet below. She clutched the railing and screamed as—

—the board began to shake violently and the metal girders that supported it groaned loudly as if under a tremendous strain. Yvonne leaned against the railing, hugging it desperately, and looked over the side as—

—the girders beneath her began to wilt slowly, as if they were melting. They swayed this way... that way... then began to move faster, whipping the board back and forth. She clutched the railing even harder, until—

—it snapped off in her arms like a frail piece of plastic, and—

—Yvonne pressed herself flat against the board, facedown, hugging it for life, when—

—the board itself began to break up, cracking loudly and separating into four long narrow sections which spread apart slowly... farther and farther apart... like... like four enormous *fingers*...

"Nooo!" Yvonne screamed, so loudly that her throat hurt. "This cuh-can't buh-be *happening!"*

Giant curved knives sprang from the ends of the four sections as they curled slowly around her.

Yvonne looked over her shoulder as—

—one of the girders shot upward from the back of the board and bent, as if jointed... like a *thumb*...

"No, please, God, *nooo!"* she screamed, closing her eyes as the hand closed slowly. "Somebody help me! Plee-heeze, somebody—"

The platform gave a tremendous jerk and Yvonne suddenly sensed movement... *upward* movement... She opened her eyes to see that—

—the diving board—or what had once *been* a diving board—was shooting up at an incredible speed. The pool was growing smaller and more distant beneath her and, when she looked up, the ceiling was growing rapidly closer, and—

—Yvonne, realizing she was about to be crushed like a fly against the ceiling, scrambled desperately toward the edge of the giant hand that held her, throwing herself off and falling down toward the pool, falling faster and faster, and she screamed when she saw that—

—the pool was *empty*. She was plummeting toward the light blue concrete floor of the pool, faster and faster, and as she fell, screaming, she saw something very strange...

In the middle of the pool floor, the concrete surface was shifting... forming rounded ridges that somehow resembled... *lips*. The lips separated into an oval-shaped opening that led to an endless tunnel with glistening pink walls that seemed to pulse.

Yvonne fell farther and farther, as if she would *never* land, and as she stared down at what she was certain would be her death—

—the opening in the pool exploded with a thick, black-red liquid that gushed upward like a geyser, spraying into the air and covering

the light blue floor, rising quickly until it was sloshing against the pool walls, nearly filling it. Blood... the pool was filling with *blood*...

The black-red surface flew up at Yvonne with lightning speed, and she fell into the pool of blood with a thick splash. She began kicking and flailing her arms, trying to keep her head above the surface so she could breathe. Her hair pressed slickly to her face as she struggled, but her efforts were doing very little, if any, good because —

—below her she felt a powerful swirl in the pool and realized that, all around her, the level of blood against the pool walls was lowering...

The strange opening in the bottom of the pool had stopped gushing blood; it was now sucking the blood back out again. Yvonne felt herself being pulled toward the center of the pool and sucked under the viscous, lumpy surface of blood. She fought harder, sweeping her arms at her sides frantically, trying to steer herself to the pool's edge. In spite of the tremendous pull beneath her, she managed to inch her way to the side of the pool... closer... a little closer, until—

—she was close enough to reach out and slap her hands onto the concrete. She clutched the lip that surrounded the pool and began pulling with all her strength to lift herself out of the mire, when—

—two feet appeared before her.

Above the viscous slurping sounds that came from the pool, Yvonne heard a sinister laugh as—

—Freddy hunkered down in front of her, propped an elbow on his knee and clanged his blades together as he said, "Careful... there's an *undertow!"*

"No!" she cried. "Please help me! Please, *help meee!"*

He reached out his right arm and delicately scraped his blades over the back of her left hand, laughing.

The stinging pain made her scream, and when she saw the blood—her *own* blood—Yvonne lost her grip and—

***

—sat up in the steam room with a little cry, froze, and looked around her. When she realized that she'd fallen asleep and dreamed it all, she relaxed with a loud sigh and scrubbed her face with her moist palms. But her relief was short-lived. A chill crept over her in spite of the steam room's heat, and she whispered, "Oh, my God..."

It's true, she thought. *Everything Alice said is true...*

Chapter Nine

"He was just like you said," Yvonne whispered over the counter to Alice that afternoon in the Crave Inn. "He was horribly burned, and he had those awful knives on his hand. And"—she extended her left arm, pulled back the bandage on her hand and showed Alice the cuts—"he did this."

Alice stared at the cuts with a sinking feeling in her stomach and said, "I'm glad that's *all* he did. You're lucky to be alive. I just don't understand how he's getting in when I'm *awake..."*

"He'd trick you into pulling friends into your dreams while you slept, then... he'd kill them. Right?"

"Right. But now he's getting to them while I'm *awake*. First Dan, then Greta... he almost got Mark, then you... next, he's liable to come after me while I'm awake. Me and... and my baby," she breathed. A frightening thought hit her hard and she covered her mouth with a palm. "Oh, my God. Yvonne, do... do unborn babies dream?"

Yvonne's eyes widened with stunned realization. "Yeah... they do. About three fourths of their lives in the womb."

Alice swept a hand through her hair, chewing her lip, and asked, "Can you reach Dr. Morris?"

"Well, it's Sunday... I can try him at home."

Taking off her apron, Alice said, "If Freddy's gotten into the baby's dreams, he could be doing something to... to *my baby..."*

Yvonne smiled slightly. *"Your* baby? The baby you don't feel anything for?"

Alice smiled, too, realizing that she did, indeed, feel something for the baby; she felt a great deal. "I just want to know right away... all right? If that's what Freddy's doing, maybe we can stop him..."

***

"From the tone of your voice, Yvonne," Dr. Morris said, seated on the corner of his desktop and frowning with irritation, "I expected some kind of emergency. But I don't see anything about Alice that

would make ultrasound necessary this early in the pregnancy. And it *certainly* isn't necessary on Sunday afternoon."

Alice said, "I want to make sure my baby's all right."

Dr. Morris sighed and rolled his eyes. "Listen, Alice, I can assure you that—"

"Do unborn babies dream, Dr. Morris?" she asked, interrupting him.

In a flat annoyed voice the doctor replied, "Approximately seventy-eight percent of their day. There's even been some research supporting the concept of a dream link between the child and mother... a sort of psychic umbilical cord."

"I don't understand..."

"Well, there may be times when a mother is actually able to *experience* her unborn baby's dreams." He frowned again, looking back and forth between Yvonne and Alice. "Is *that* why you interrupted my tennis game? Because you're afraid your baby's having *nightmares?"*

"We're here to find out everything we can, Doctor."

Yvonne said, "And the thing of it is, we're kind of in a hurry, so maybe you could give Alice the test first and yell at us later?"

He stood. "Well, now that my afternoon's ruined *anyway,* I might as well..."

***

Mark was exhausted; he'd been guzzling coffee all day, and as a result he had a headache and his hands were trembling. He hadn't slept last night—hadn't *allowed* himself to sleep—now that he knew his dreams were dangerous.

To keep himself occupied, he'd been working furiously, drawing a single picture over and over again, each time from a different angle: the house he'd seen in his dream with the rusty, spiked Welcome mat before the door.

He began to nod sleepily over his work, and sat up with a jerk, yawning, then sipping his coffee. As he set his cup down again, he noticed a comic book on his table that he hadn't seen before. He

picked it up and read the title written in red dripping letters on the cover: KRUEGER'S NIGHTMARES FROM HELL. Curious, he opened it at random and gasped when he saw—

—a drawing of Greta in an enormous high chair, her white, bloated face covered with dribbling lumps of food. Horrified, Mark flipped through the comic book and saw—

—a drawing of Dan in the clutches of a motorcycle with hideous human features, and—

—Yvonne diving into an empty swimming pool with an enormous vaginal-like opening in the bottom, and—

—*himself*. The drawing depicted Mark at his drawing table reading a comic book; it was followed by several blank panels. He took in a breath and whispered, "Oh, my Guh—"

—a terribly scarred hand tore out of the comic book's pages and slapped onto Mark's face, the fingers digging into his flesh, and as Mark screamed—

—the hand pulled with tremendous strength, ripping Mark from his chair and—

—*into the comic book!*

He was tossed through the air and back into his own room, except... it wasn't *really* his room. It was a two-dimensional *illustration* of his room, drawn in the exaggerated perspective of a comic book. He hit the floor hard and landed against his drawing table, which ripped like paper. It *was* paper, a drawing rather than an actual, tangible piece of furniture.

He heard an ominous ripping sound and, sprawled on the floor, looked up to see that—

—four blades were cutting through the paper wall. Evil eyes peered through the cuts, and Mark heard a laugh. Scrambling to his feet, Mark ran to the door, but—

—he couldn't turn the knob because there was nothing to *turn,* nothing to grab hold of... it was just a drawing...

Behind him Freddy's knives continued to slice the paper... then he stepped into the room and laughed uproariously...

***

Lying on her back, Alice watched the ultrasound screen, enchanted as she listened to the sound of her baby's heartbeat.

"We're still very early along in development," Dr. Morris muttered, mostly to himself. "Everything seems fine... heartbeat's strong..."

The rhythmic sound was almost hypnotic... *magical*... and Alice found herself smiling as she looked at the screen, riveted, until—

—she heard another sound, a frightening sound that seemed to come from within her own head... the sound of ripping paper...

With a start, she looked around her for the source of the sound, but saw nothing unusual. She returned her attention to the screen and, for the moment, decided to ignore it...

***

Mark ran to the nearest window, but it would not open.

"Faster than a head-on collision!" Freddy roared.

As Mark clawed at the window, searching for a hold, he saw movement outside. A comic book version of a semi and Dan's red truck were headed straight for one another at high speed. When they collided, the word CRASH! appeared in a jagged bubble in the air above them.

"No!" Mark cried, covering his eyes with his hands.

Behind him Freddy shouted, "Deader than your darling Greta!"

When Mark lowered his hands, the window was gone, replaced by a vivid drawing of Greta in an old, decayed high chair, her skin rotting, her eyes gone from their sockets, her mouth hanging open and filled with mush.

Mark screamed and spun around as—

—Freddy laughed. "Able to shred stupid little boys into *bits* and *pieces?"* He lifted his deadly claw high above Mark...

***

"Everything's fine," Dr. Morris said half-heartedly, apparently preoccupied with the tennis game he was missing. He turned to Yvonne and said, "I'd like to have a word with you in my office."

Without waiting for a response, he left the room. Yvonne turned to Alice, shrugged, and followed him out.

Alice lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering if perhaps the ultrasound would not detect any damage Freddy might cause, when—

—the ceiling disappeared as she heard Mark screaming, *"Aaaaliiiice!"* and she saw a frightening comic-book illustration of him in his room, his eyes wide with horror as—

—Freddy brought his claws down and sliced through the drawing of Mark. They cut him as if he were paper—he *was* paper—and the shreds fluttered to the floor in a pool of bright red ink...

"No!" Alice shouted, sitting up and swinging her legs off the bed as —

—the wall before her began to pulsate, ribbed with veins, and the vertical lips appeared once again, opening to reveal the long pink tunnel that glistened with dribbling juices, and—

—without warning, Alice was sucked off the bed and pulled headlong into the opening.

She tumbled head over heels down the twisting tunnel until she was swept into an enormous, cavernous opening with viscous walls lined with pulsing veins. She lost some speed and moved slower as she tumbled between arteries and organs... she recognized them *immediately*... they looked like the illustrations from her biology textbooks... but she didn't *understand* them. Human organs hung over her like giant stars in a night sky.

Alice floated slowly into a beam of glowing light and turned around to see—

—a giant fetus, its knees curled up beneath its chin. Her eyes widened as she thought, *My baby... I'm inside* myself!

The fetus bobbed slightly, its umbilical cord curling from its belly, and turned toward her. Alice watched with wide-eyed fascination, smiling, until—

—the belly of the fetus began to move, bulge, and the bulges took on human facial features. Alice gaped in horror as the features took on more definition and she recognized—

—Dan and Greta!

Alice's scream echoed off the pink fleshy uterine walls around her as the faces yawned silently, their eyes pleading for help, for release...

She heard another scream meld with her own. It, too, echoed, growing closer and closer behind her. She turned to see a blob of light glowing a soft electric blue, plummeting toward her, and she ducked, looking up to see Mark's face in the light, his mouth gaping as he shot toward the fetus, hitting its belly and disappearing in a burst of light.

No! Alice thought. *He got Mark... that bastard got Mark...*

The uterine wall behind the fetus began to bulge and undulate... facial features began to protrude from the glistening pink surface, until—

—Freddy was grinning at her, laughing. "Like father... like *son...*"

"No!" Alice screamed. "You're *not* my baby's *father!"* and—

—Dr. Morris leaned over her, frowning, and said, "Of course I'm not."

Alice blinked, sat up and looked around at the ultrasound equipment, sputtering, "Muh-My baby! What did he duh-to my buh-baby?"

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with your baby," Dr. Morris said. "He's a perfectly healthy child. A little big for so early on, but as active and normal as any baby I've ever seen."

Alice turned to Yvonne and hissed, "He's feeding the souls to the baby! I saw it... *all* of it! And... he got Mark. *I saw his soul!"*

Yvonne stepped forward quickly and said, "I'm sorry, Dr. Morris, she's been having such a tough time since Dan died. I thought it might help. I'll take her home. I'm really sorry we dragged you down here."

Alice sat up and clutched Yvonne's shoulders. "He's taking their *souls!* He's *feeding* them to my *baby!"*

Glancing at Dr. Morris apologetically, Yvonne said, "I'll take her home. It'll all look different after she gets some sleep."

Alice stood and Yvonne put an arm around her, leading her out...

***

When they were gone, Dr. Morris went into his office, picked up the phone and dialed the Jordans' number, waiting for an answer. "Hello, Mrs. Jordan? This is Dr. Morris. I'm terribly sorry to call on a Sunday but... well, I think this is rather important. It's about Alice Johnson..."

Chapter Ten

"I promise he won't get to you, Yvonne," Alice said as Yvonne parked her car in front of Alice's house. "He got to Mark, but I won't *let* him get to you."

"If he's getting in through your baby," Yvonne said as they went up to the walk to the front door, "how are you going to stop him?"

"I don't know. I'm still putting the pieces together. There's a woman I've been seeing in my dreams, a nun... there's something I'm missing." She opened the front door and they went inside. "You worry about staying *awake*... I'll worry about Freddy."

Alice led Yvonne into the living room and they froze because—

—Mr. and Mrs. Jordan were sitting with Alice's dad, staring at her solemnly. Alice smiled and said, "Oh... hi."

"Sit down, Alice," Mrs. Jordan said. "We have something to say to you."

Alice hesitated, sensing that something was up. She glanced at her father; he looked serious, but averted his eyes.

"I should be getting home," Yvonne whispered.

"Remember what I told you," Alice said. *"Stay awake!"*

After Yvonne left, Alice seated herself and faced the Jordans. Mrs. Jordan looked at her with a tight, pinched expression and said prissily, "We'd like to ask you... *dear*... exactly what you intend to do with your baby."

"What I intend to *do,* Mrs. Jordan?" Alice asked.

"Well, you can't very well raise a child on what you make at that *diner,* can you?"

Mrs. Jordan nodded and looked at her husband; he turned away. She said, "I'm afraid we're going to have to ask you for custody of the child."

"What? He's *my* child!"

"Yours and Dan's. *Our* grandchild. We have rights here, too, you know. In your present condition, Alice, you're hardly a fit mother."

"Condition? What condition? I don't have a *condition!"*

"We had a call from Dr. Morris. He said you were in his office earlier today, nearly hysterical. He said you were having paranoid delusions... hallucinations..."

"Wait, you don't understand, I was—"

"You've been through a *lot,* Alice," Mrs. Jordan said firmly. "But a child's welfare is at stake."

"Look," Alice said with equal firmness, "there's no *way* I'm gonna let you take my baby."

Mrs. Jordan gave her a small, cold smile. "There's no court in the country that would let you keep the child."

Alice stood, shocked that this woman would say such a thing to her. She turned to her dad and asked, "What do *you* say, Daddy?"

He turned to her slowly, frowned, and looked at Mrs. Jordan for a moment, then said, very calmly, "Well, I think you'd make a hell of a better mother than *this* raving bitch."

Relieved, Alice stifled a giggle.

Mrs. Jordan turned to Alice's dad and snapped, "You have *no* right to talk to me like that."

"But you've got a right to walk in here and talk to my daughter any way you please?" he snapped back, standing. "I'm gonna have to ask you to leave. Personally, I'd rather *bodily* remove you... but I'll control myself and *ask* you to leave."

Glaring at him, Mrs. Jordan stood and said, "You'll hear from our attorneys." She stalked out of the house.

Mr. Jordan stood too. "I'm sorry, Alice," he said, then turned to her dad. "It's just that... our grandchild is all we have left of Dan."

"I understand," Mr. Johnson said, slapping Jordan on the back. "Remember... I lost *my* son too." After Mr. Jordan followed his wife out of the house, Alice's dad turned to her and said ominously, "I swear to God, I've never wanted a drink so badly in all my *life."* Then he smiled slowly and took her in his arms.

***

Although she was off duty, Yvonne was wearing her uniform as she entered the pharmaceutical room, glancing over her shoulder to

make sure no one was watching. Using the key she'd sneaked away from the nurse's desk, she opened the cabinet that held the hospital's narcotics and searched the shelves frantically. When she found what she wanted—a *powerful* sleeping pill—she grabbed the bottle, shook two pills into her hand, replaced it, and closed the cabinet. She left the room and, walking casually, replaced the key on its hook at the nurse's desk. Popping the pills into her mouth, she went to the drinking fountain in the corridor and drank them down, then went to a room that she knew would be empty for the rest of the day. Lying down on the bed, she braced herself for whatever might come and closed her eyes...

***

Alice was sickened by what she saw.

She sat in the Springwood Public Library, watching as microfilm newspaper articles passed before her on the screen, chronicling the lives—and *deaths*—of Fred Krueger's victims. She wasn't sure exactly what she was looking for, but she was certain she'd know it when it came.

It finally did: KILLER KRUEGER'S MOTHER DIES MYSTERIOUSLY.

Alice froze on a photograph of a nun in a white habit—the same nun she'd seen in her waking-dream the evening Dan died—and the caption below read: *Sister Mary Helena (Amanda Krueger)—Was it Suicide?*

"Found you, lady," Alice said to herself, attracting a few annoyed glares from the readers around her. She pulled in on the woman in the picture, placed both hands flat on the table before her, and began to concentrate hard, her forehead breaking out with beads of perspiration, as she stared at Amanda Krueger intensely, until—

—the air was sucked away from around her as it had been in Mark's room and she shot backward, passing through some invisible hole in reality, until—

—she was standing before the same Gothic stone building she'd seen in Springwood Park in her waking-dream days, in front of... the

building in which Alice had watched Fred Krueger's birth...

There was no one around, so Alice entered, calling "Amanda! Amanda Krueger? Aman—um, Sister Mary Helena! Are you here? Hello?" She hurried down a long cold corridor, determined to find the woman who'd spoken to her... the woman who had frightened Freddy Krueger...

The corridor seemed endless, and although she called out again and again, she got no response. She stopped in the corridor, looking all around her, spinning to see—

—"Jacob!" she cried, surprised to see the boy standing a few yards behind her beneath a stone archway. He was not facing her and did not turn when she spoke; he was looking up at someone else... someone standing out of sight, behind the edge of the archway. "Ja—*Jacob?"*

He turned to her then, as if startled, looking almost *guilty,* and he staggered suddenly against the archway.

"Jacob!" Alice shouted as she rushed toward him. It was suddenly no longer important that she find Amanda Krueger... *nothing* seemed as important as helping that pale little boy... He fell into her arms when she reached him, looking into her eyes wearily. "Jacob, are you all *right?"*

He was perspiring, feverish, and he no longer looked simply pale and ill... his face was definitely *different*...

Jacob's nose was thinner, longer... his mouth seemed smaller, his lips seemed to have taken on a half-hearted sneer. His face had taken on very familiar—*frighteningly* familiar—characteristics...

Jacob was beginning to resemble Freddy Krueger.

He smiled pathetically, and with a dreamy look in his eyes, began to sing: "One, two... Freddy's coming for you... three, four... better lock the door... five, six..."

Alice gasped, listening as Jacob sang on and on, his drunken smile never wavering. "Where did you learn that song?" she asked breathlessly.

"My... friend... taught me..." He began singing again: "One, two... Freddy's coming for you..."

Alice shook him. "Jacob, your friend, who—*Jacob?*—who *is* he? What does he *look* like? Jacob?"

As the boy went on singing, another voice—a woman's voice—spoke up behind Alice: *"You* know what he looks like."

Alice spun around to see Amanda Krueger in her white nun's habit.

"And you know what he wants," Amanda went on. "He wants to make your child his own."

Alice nodded as if she'd known all along; deep down inside, she was sure she had. "How do I stop him?" she asked.

"It may be too late."

"What do you mean?"

"Your friend Yvonne thinks she can fight your battles for you."

Alice stared at her a moment in mute horror, then: "She's fallen *asleep?"*

Amanda nodded, looking sad... resigned.

Alice turned to Jacob, but—

—he was gone. When she called his name, Amanda whispered, "He's losing the battle."

Looking at the empty space where Jacob had been only moments ago, Alice whispered, "Jacob?" thinking, *My son?*

"It takes a *mother's* love," Amanda whispered.

Alice screamed, *"How do I stop your son?"*

"There isn't much time. Look how ill the child is already." She pointed down the corridor behind Alice, who spun around and gasped as—

—Jacob staggered around a corner and disappeared.

Alice tore after him, racing around the corner and down the intersecting corridor, as Jacob rounded still another corner... and another... another and another... until—

—Alice rounded a corner and, instead of Jacob, she saw Amanda ahead of her, walking toward another corridor.

"Wait!" Alice called. "You have to help me!"

"I can't help you here," Amanda's voice echoed back coldly.

Alice doubled her fists and screamed, "I'm not gonna let him win! I'll stop him with or without you!"

Amanda disappeared.

As Alice stood in the deserted corridor, determination burning in her eyes, she saw the wall ahead of her begin to pulse... change color... throb with veins... grow long vertical lips that opened into a glistening pink tunnel...

Alice took a deep breath and ran for the opening, picking up speed as she neared the wall, and finally plunged between the lips, landing firmly on her feet in—

—Freddy's boiler room. *This isn't good,* she thought as she looked around, gasping when she saw—

—Freddy. But she couldn't see *all* of him. From the chest up he was perfectly visible, but below that there was *nothing,* as if he were poking his head out of thin air. Around him the air quavered like the surface of a smooth pond being disturbed.

"Welcome to Freddyland!" he quipped.

"What're you doing, Krueger? What're you doing to my *son?* To my *friends? Where's Yvonne?"*

Freddy's arm appeared suddenly, from *nowhere,* and his fist was closed tight on a clump of Yvonne's hair, lifting her head from the pool of thin air. Her face and hair were wet and she shook her head, gasping as if she'd been held underwater... then he shoved her back into nothingness.

"Whatsa *matter,* Alice?" Freddy growled. "Running out of *friends* again?"

She tried to control herself, tried not to become emotional; instead, she held onto her anger and said, "It's not that easy anymore, Krueger." Her forehead creased as she concentrated on Krueger and on her anger, until—

—the invisible vertical pool became a wall of flames that engulfed Freddy. He recoiled with a gut-wrenching scream, and—

—Yvonne tumbled from the nothingness, falling to the floor in a steaming, seared heap.

"I came *looking* for you this time, Krueger!" Alice snapped, kneeling beside Yvonne and shaking her. When Yvonne's eyes opened, Alice hissed, *"Wake up!"*

Yvonne was gone in an instant.

"This is between you and me," Alice said threateningly.

"Why do you think I let *her* go?"

"I know why you want me here, Freddy. I know you need my baby. You're ready for your next turn in the wheel, aren't you?"

Some of the sick amusement left Freddy's face and his eyes narrowed. He was looking angrier by the moment.

"You want to come back into the real world and kill again... *don't you?* And you need my baby so you can come back here even *stronger*. The final turn of the wheel..."

Freddy's knives were clanging angrily beside him and he was beginning to snarl.

"Well, you're not coming back through *Jacob,* you son of a bitch!"

Freddy's face twisted into a hideous mask of hatred and he lunged for her. Alice dove aside, kicking up a leg to trip him. Her foot caught his ankle and Freddy plunged forward, flipping over the edge of the boiler-room walkway, but not before he reached out and grabbed her leg, pulling her over with him. Alice screamed as they fell, fighting to maintain her control.

Remember, she told herself, *you are your own dream master...*

Alice concentrated hard on Greta, mentally clinging to a vivid image of her friend, until—

—they hit the filthy concrete floor below and Alice broke from a smooth roll to stand on her feet. She smiled triumphantly when she saw that Freddy was trapped in an enormous high chair made of filthy rusted metal. He cried out, enraged, as he fought to free his arms from the metal tray that crossed his lap. He curled his arms under the tray and heaved, grunting with exertion, the muscle cords in his neck pressing tautly against his skin, until the tray began to make weak cracking sounds, and—

—Alice concentrated hard on Dan, drawing strength from his memory, power from his love, and she felt herself changing... transforming. She fell to her hands and knees, except they weren't hands and knees anymore. Her arms were above her head, stretched out on each side, like... *handlebars...* and her legs curled up tighter and tighter until they formed a perfectly round circle... a *wheel...* and another wheel grew from her chest, coming to rest on the concrete... and her engine *revved...*

As Freddy tore the tray away and stood up in the high chair, lifting the tray over his head to throw at Alice, she shot toward him in a streak of gleaming chrome, crashing through the high chair and sending Freddy into the air, flailing helplessly like a rag doll.

Alice spun around and faced him when he landed, her engine growling like a wild beast. Freddy crouched, bracing himself for her as Alice shot forward again. At precisely the right moment Freddy jumped into the air, clambering onto Alice as she sped by. Feeling him clutching her handlebars and straddling her back, Alice began to concentrate again... this time on the asylum... on Freddy's one hundred lunatic fathers...

She headed straight for a concrete wall with a burst of speed, hitting it and crashing through the concrete easily, landing with a jerk on—

—the floor of the asylum. She squealed to a halt, fell into a roll and came out of it on her feet, herself once again, as—

—Freddy stood and glanced around at his surroundings with a look of frightened recognition on his face. Alice found the stairs that led to the door above and climbed them slowly, watching... waiting...

They oozed from the shadows, some of them wearing filthy hospital gowns, others only tatters or completely naked. Freddy spun around to flee, but they surrounded him, coming in from all sides, closing in more rapidly as Alice watched from above. Some of them laughed, others growled, and some just made low gurgling sounds as they reached out, and—

—Freddy looked up at Alice and screamed as they fell on him, pulling, ripping, hitting, clawing.

She heard the crack of his bones... the tearing of his flesh...

"Welcome home, Freddy," she breathed.

As the voices of the maniacs rose to an unbearable cacophony, Alice turned, walked up the stairs and stepped into the corridor, closing the heavy iron door behind her.

"Mommy... wanna meet my new friend?"

Alice turned with a gasp and saw Jacob standing in the corridor beside Freddy.

"You've learned a few tricks from me, Alice," Freddy said. "But you haven't learned them all..." He reached down and took Jacob's hand.

Alice started toward him, shouting, "You won't hurt him! You need us both!"

"I've *got* you both."

Alice stopped a few yards away and focused on Jacob. She held out her arms and called, "C'mon, Jacob... time to go home."

Freddy hunkered down and whispered in the boy's ear, "This *is* your home."

"Jacob, *listen* to me. I'm your *mother!"*

"But *I'm* your friend. And friends're more *fun!"*

Jacob seemed torn, looking from Alice to Freddy and back again. She beckoned him with both hands and called his name again. He finally broke away from Freddy and ran toward her, arms outstretched, but his feet skittered to a halt, and Alice's voice caught in her throat when—

—a man called out from behind Jacob: "Wait, Jacob!" The boy stopped and turned, and Alice looked over his shoulder. Dan was walking down the corridor toward Jacob, his smile warm and loving as he said, "Let's go to your mother." Jacob hesitated as Dan reached down and took his hand. "C'mon, Jacob."

Alice's heart ached as she watched Dan, wishing he could really be back, to stay... but she knew he wasn't...

"Jacob, that's not Dan!" Alice cried.

As she spoke, the Dan-thing reached for Jacob's face with his right hand and—

—Alice screamed, "I love you, Jacob!" and—

—Jacob tore away from the man and threw himself toward Alice as —

—razor-sharp claws sprang from the Dan-thing's fingers—from *Freddy's* fingers—and swiped the air inches from Jacob's face as the boy ran for his mother, and—

—Alice stood, her arms open, crying, "Hurry, Jacob, c'mon, Jacob, *come on!"*

Jacob dove for his mother and slid between her arms, slamming into her torso, and—

—they were engulfed in a sudden flash of soft glowing light as Jacob merged silently with his mother. Alice felt him pass into her body, and she sucked in a deep breath, opening her eyes and screaming as—

—Freddy leaped toward her, plunging through the aura of white light and passing into her like a knife, directly behind Jacob.

Alice fell to the floor, retching, and cried at the top of her lungs, *"AMANDAAAA!"*

After her cry finished echoing through the corridor, Alice heard a sound behind her and turned to see Amanda Krueger standing before a large door... the iron door that led to the room full of maniacs.

"You were his mother," Alice said, struggling to her feet. "It's time to take him back."

"He's an abomination," the nun hissed.

"You've *got* to..." Alice swayed with another pain, but this one did not stop. With her hands on her belly, she felt movement inside... powerful, restless movement... she looked down to see her belly growing rapidly, expanding like a balloon being inflated... and all the while there was movement within. She staggered back against the wall and cried, "You're caught in the circle with him! You've *got* to break it! *You've got to take him back!"*

Amanda stared at Alice's growing belly for a long moment, then stepped forward with a resigned nod.

A spasm of pain knocked Alice to her knees; she looked up at Amanda pleadingly.

Amanda leaned forward, placed a gentle hand on Alice's stomach and said in little more than a breath, "My son... I forgive you..."

Alice convulsed as something tore away inside her and a burst of dull light the color of sickness and death oozed from her abdomen, flashed, and shot directly into Amanda's, making Amanda stumble backward.

Alice stood slowly, and there was a long silent pause between them, until—

—Amanda fell to her knees and clutched her face as her skin began to shift, to bubble like melted wax, and the skin on her hands began

to shrivel and darken.

Alice rushed toward her to help, but Amanda cried, "No! Get away from me! Take your son and leave! *Save your son!"*

She paused, grimacing, as Amanda's condition became worse... her nose narrowed and lengthened... her eyes became sinister glistening slits... Amanda began to resemble her own monstrous son...

Alice turned and dashed down the corridor, stopping a few hundred yards away when she heard a hellish scream from behind her. She turned to look at Amanda, but—

—doors were slamming all the way down the corridor, closing the passage off and separating her from the nun. She turned again and ran on down the corridor, murmuring, "We're going home, Jacob..."

Chapter Eleven

Months later, as Alice lay in her hospital room holding her baby, her dad and Yvonne stood beside her bed, beaming.

"He's beautiful," Yvonne whispered.

Alice said, "Just like his dad." Smiling up at her father, she added, "And his grandpa."

Her dad stroked her cheek and said, "You done good, sweetheart. I'm proud of you. *And* of li'l Jacob Daniel, here. He's gonna be a fine boy... a fine young man. You just wait. We'll *see* to that."

Alice's smile faltered and she felt a lump in her throat as she whispered, "I just wish... everyone could be here. Dan... Greta... Mark." She shook her head slowly. "Thank God he's gone."

"Who?" her dad asked.

"You know who, Dad. We've talked about him before. *Freddy."*

Alice watched as her dad and Yvonne exchanged a troubled glance.

"I know," he said, leaning close. "You've told me about him, and I *believe* you. But he's gone now, like you said."

"So are my friends."

"I know, honey. And that's bad. But Freddy's gone, so from now on let's think of their deaths as accidents. Dan drove into a truck... Greta choked on a piece of fish... Mark's bed collapsed and crushed him at his drawing table... I think maybe it'll make it easier to live with. Okay?"

She nodded hesitantly, knowing he was right.

"So smile for me," he said.

Alice smiled as Jacob Daniel Johnson cooed in her arms...